HI-FI PRIMER: 9 AFFORDABLE WAYS TO UPGRADE YOUR HI-FI SYSTEM

australian
hi-fi

SONIC PRECISION

On-ear cans make their mark

THE STRONGEST LINK

Marantz's reference-quality streaming preamp is truly aspirational

SILENT SPINNER

E.A.T. deck is "audibly perfect"

FUTURE

ISSUE 543
A$11.95

9 771442 125002 05

REVIEWED

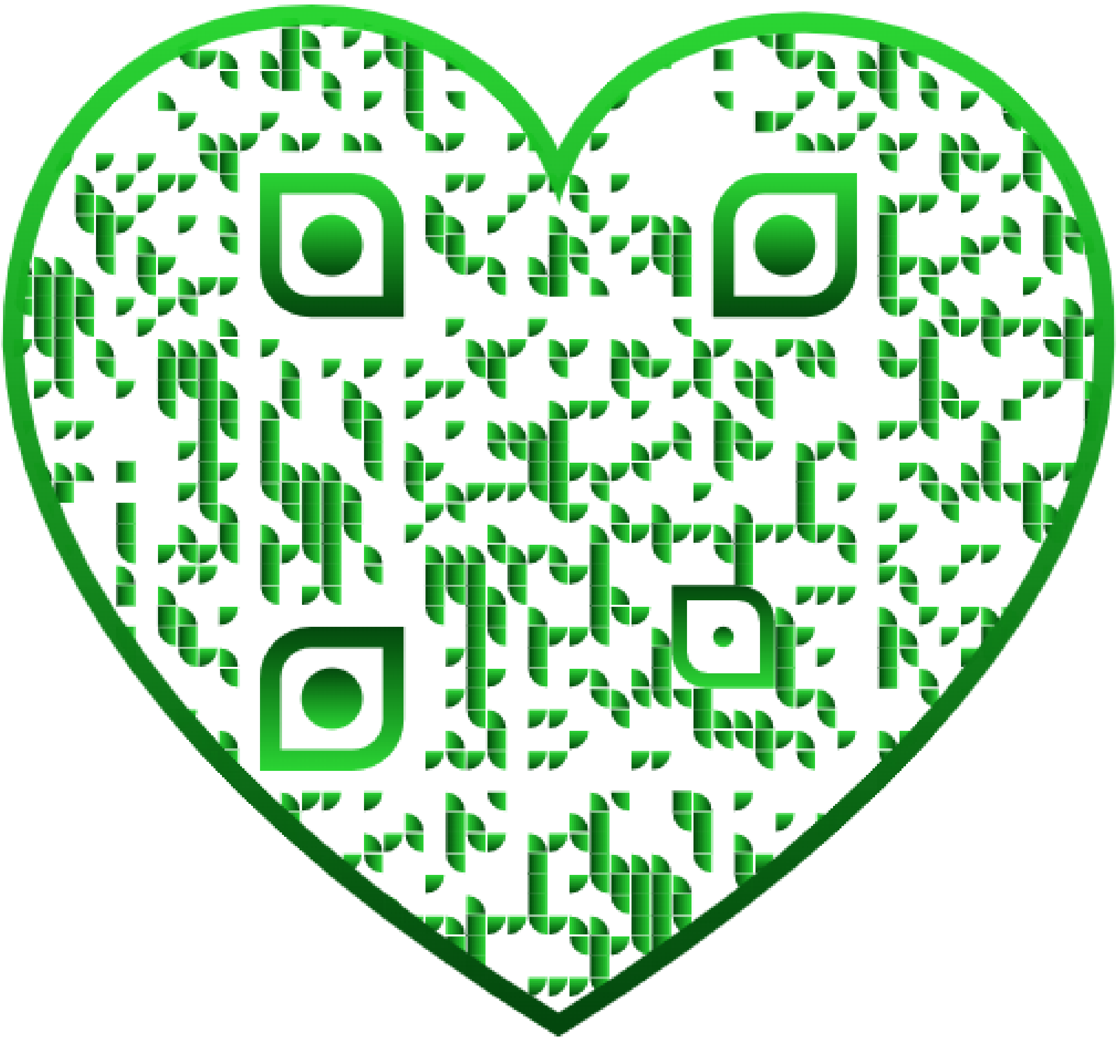
SOUND DESIGN

Ruark Audio system sounds as good as it looks

REVIEWED

HOME GROWN HEROES

VAF standmounts deliver detail and dynamism



Wattson Audio
SWITZERLAND

WATTSON AUDIO MADISON STREAMER & POWER AMPLIFIER

The Madison Streamer and Amplifier by Wattson Audio blend high-performance, precision engineering with elegant, compact design.

The Streamer features an upgradable DSP-driven DAC and digital volume control, delivering both technical accuracy and emotional musicality, and can connect directly to power amps or integrate with existing audio systems.

Meanwhile, the Madison Amplifier combines CH Precision's reference-grade performance with Wattson's refined aesthetics, offering dynamic, transparent sound with tonal purity and adaptable configurations—from stereo to bi-amp or mono. Together, they provide a versatile, high-fidelity audio experience that redefines expectations at an accessible price point.

AVAILABLE IN AUSTRALIA THROUGH **ABSOLUTE HI END** 0488 777 999 . info@absolutehiend.com . www.absolutehiend.com

---

SILENT ANGEL

Munich MU Music Streamer

A High-End premier network streamer, advancing the formidable capabilities of the iconic M1. The development of this sophisticated, double-layer chassis design was inspired by our State-of-the-Art Bonn NX and Genesis GX combined with meticulous fine-tuning and relentless testing, complemented by specialized system software, every effort has been devoted to creating an unmatched digital audio experience.

Also available:
(black & silver)

Bonn NX

Forester F2

Genesis GX

Rhein Z1 PLus

Sound Gallery
soundgallery.com.au

GrooveWorks
recordclean.com.au

Class A Audio
classaaudio.com.au

Mcleans SHE
mcleans.info

The Audio Experts
theaudioexperts.com.au

GC Hi-Fi
gc-hifi.com.au

Audio Solutions
www.audiosolutions.net.au

HeyNow Hi-Fi
heynowhifi.com.au

Hi End Audio
hiendaudio.com.au

The Audio Tailor
theaudiotailor.com.au

Editor's lead in

G'day, *Australian Hi-Fi* readers! As you'd likely have read in the previous issue, the wonderful Becky Roberts has headed back to the UK, bidding farewell to the *Australian Hi-Fi* editor's chair in the process. But the show must go on, as they say, so here you have my debut issue in your hands – by happy coincidence featuring reviews of some of my favourite products to be released this year.

I arrive in the *Australian Hi-Fi* editorship role having spent just over 10 years as an AV journalist. My first role in the field was working in the *What Hi-Fi?* stockroom back in London, with none other than Becky herself, so it's a bittersweet passing of the baton in many ways.

It was those early *What Hi-Fi?* days that are to thank for making me such a hi-fi enthusiast; I was hooked as soon as I was exposed to 'proper' hi-fi and the wonders it could do for sound quality. When I started putting my own first real system together back then, I gravitated towards the half-width enclosures of Rega's electronics: I invested in the UK company's Brio-R integrated amp, the Apollo-R CD player (I didn't even own a decent-sized CD collection at the time, I just loved the top-mounted opening!), and also the DAC-R – so I that could connect my laptop, and stream music. And of course I could hardly have a Rega system without one of their turntables, so I added the Planar 3 to complete my set of sources.

Speakers? I secured myself a pair of the excellent little Q Acoustics 3010 standmounts – and connected it all with cabling from the UK's Chord Electronics.

I loved that system; it stayed with me between a couple of different houses in London, then ended up in my parents' home, where I stayed for a while just before taking my one-way ticket to Australia.

And that system is still back there. I miss it – whenever I head back to visit, I say a quick hello to my parents before heading up to my room and settling down with some music. While I have been able to ship the bulk of my record collection out to Australia, I compared the costs of shipping out the system, and decided to instead build a fresh one for my new home .

This is now changing regularly according to my review schedule, but the key elements are a Marantz Model 60n network streaming amplifier, a JBL Spinner BT turntable, and a pair of KEF LS50 Meta speakers. It's a relatively simple system, but it covers all the bases and has been keeping me happy until now. The privileged position I now hold is not lost on me as I will now get to ~~play with~~ test a host of new components for the purpose of future reviews. Exciting times ahead!

One of my first reviews for this debut issue is the Kaleidescape Strato E 4K digital movie player, which you'll find on page 26. This is more a home-cinema product than one intended to integrate with your hi-fi stack, but nevertheless it should still appeal to self-respecting audiophiles, partly because Kaleidescape's digital store is loaded with live concerts, some in 4K and a few in Dolby Atmos. One such live concert is *Hans Zimmer: Live in Prague* and, having seen the maestro himself in Sydney earlier this year, I downloaded the concert to compare. Even if you already love listening to movie soundtracks on your dedicated audio system, there's something extra special about being able to see them being performed live, too – and boy, does the Kaleidescape player do a marvellous job on both the audio and video fronts.

Also in this issue, you'll find a review of Ruark Audio's R-610 music console and matching Sabre-R loudspeakers. This is a brand with a long history originally in loudspeakers, and later in smart table radio products that not only perform well, but also look wonderful. This latest all-singing, all-dancing bundle certainly keeps that momentum going… I think it's an absolute stunner – plus it's all designed in Essex, the English county where I was born, so it's good to promote a homegrown hero of a product. But now, of course, I call Australia home – Sydney, specifically – and I'm looking forward to becoming equally well acquainted with the wonderful world of Australian hi-fi.

Max Langridge, Editor
max.langridge@futurenet.com

Sonus faber®

AMATI SUPREME

Prepare to be captivated by Amati Supreme, an extraordinary work of art that transcends the boundaries of traditional audio. It's more than just a speaker; it's an immersive experience, a testament to technological prowess and an icon of contemporary luxury. With Amati Supreme, you don't just listen to music; you feel it, experiencing an unparalleled soundscape that elevates every moment into an unforgettable auditory journey.

www.synergyaudio.com | 03 9459 7474 | /synergyaudiovisual

SYNERGY AUDIO VISUAL

australian
hi-fi
Issue 543

Future Publishing Australia
PO Box Q1179, Queen Victoria Building
Sydney, NSW 1239

Email: aushifi@futurenet.com
Web: www.whathifi.com/australianhifi

Subscription enquiries:
Please call CRM on (02) 8227 6486
or visit www.techmags.com.au

Editorial
Editor: **Max Langridge**
max.langridge@futurenet.com
Art Director: **Kristian Hagen**
kristian.hagen@futurenet.com
Writer-at-large: **Greg Borrowman**
greg.borrowman@futurenet.com

Contributors
Jez Ford, Steve Holding, Ian Frazer, Ketan Bharadia,
John Archer, Simon Lucas, Becky Roberts, Kash Kabir

Production
Jez Ford, Dan Gardiner, Ben Mansill

Photography
All copyrights and trademarks are recognised and respected.

Advertising
Advertising Director: **Jim Preece**
jim.preece@futurenet.com
Advertising Manager: **Lewis Preece**
lewis.preece@futurenet.com

Management
Managing Director: **Neville Daniels**

Printed by IVE GROUP

Distribution: Are Direct Pty Limited (www.aredirect.com.au)

ISSN 0159-0030

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards. The manufacturing paper mill holds full FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) or PEFC certification and accreditation

All contents © 2025 Future Publishing Australia or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the prices of products/services referred to in this publication. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

Information contained in this magazine, whether in editorial matter or in feature articles or in advertisements or otherwise, including in particular, but not limited to, technical information, is published on the basis that neither the publisher, its employees and/or agents, nor its distributors accepts or assumes liability or responsibility for any loss or damage resulting from the incorrectness of such information. The submission of material and/or products to us signifies that you have read, acknowledged and accepted all the abovementioned conditions.

If you submit material to us you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material and/or equipment you submit to us is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, and/or adapt all submissions. The submission of material and/or products or equipment to us signifies that you have read, acknowledged and accepted all the abovementioned conditions.

Equipment reviews are based on laboratory measurements and controlled listening tests and should be construed as applying to the specific sample tested—neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees assume responsibility for product performance, quality or applicability.

Privacy statement
If you provide information about yourself this will be used to provide you with products or services you have requested. We may supply your information to contractors to enable us to do this. Future Publishing Australia will also use your information to inform you of other publications, products, services and events. Future Publishing Australia may also give your information to organisations that are providing special prizes or offers and are clearly associated with the Reader Offer. Unless you tell us not to, Future Publishing Australia may give your information to other organisations that may use it to inform you of other products, services or events. If you would like to gain access to the information Future Publishing Australia holds about you, please contact us.

FUTURE
Connectors.
Creators.
Experience
Makers.

Future plc is a public company
quoted on the London Stock
Exchange
(symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

Chief executive **Kevin Yi Ling**
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief financial and strategy officer **Sharjeel Suleman**

Tel +44 (0) 1225 442 244

Contents

AUSTRALIAN HI-FI MAGAZINE ISSUE 543

Page 40: VAF DC-2S bookshelf speakers

Equipment reviews

17 Marantz Link 10n streaming preamplifier

This member of Marantz's trio of 'Reference Standard' components is one this reviewer wouldn't be prouder to own.

26 Kaleidescape Strato E 4K movie player

A talented player for movies, TV shows and, most importantly, live concerts, with sound quality that demands a high-end system.

32 Wattson Audio Madison power amplifier

Capable of rendering total silence and digging up the tiniest of musical details, this Swiss-made power amp is unique in sound and in style.

40 VAF DC-2S bookshelf speakers

These standmounts from the Adelaide outfit will reward you with an engaging, insightful listen… with the right partnering equipment.

43 Beyerdynamic Aventho 100 on-ear headphones

Over-ear headphones may steal many headlines, but our reviewer found this on-ear model served up enough detail and dynamism to satisfy discerning listeners.

46 Ruark Audio R-610 music console & Sabre-R stand-mount speakers

This perfectly partnered and attractive package from the Essex-based brand has everything a budding hi-fi enthusiast could need.

58 Meze Audio Poet wired headphones

Mr Meze has certainly succeeded in his desire to create an objet d'art here, but where there is visual beauty there is also plenty of sonic allure thanks to these open-backs' wonderfully open, sparkling and revealing nature.

Page 10 KEF's new Coda W powered speakers

Features

06 Audio News
Dali Kupid bookshelf speakers, Jamo C707PA MKII active speakers, Yamaha Tru X Surround 90A Dolby Atmos soundbar, Pro-Ject Tube Box S3 B and Tube Box E, Luxman D-03R CD player, KEF Coda W wireless speakers, Arcam A5+, A15+ and A25+ integrated amplifiers, Acoustic Energy AE2 bookshelf speakers, Sennheiser HDB 630, Nagra Compact series, Vivid Audio Giya Cu loudspeakers, Triangle Capella 2, Advance Paris Apex series, Harman's acquisition of Masimo Consumer.

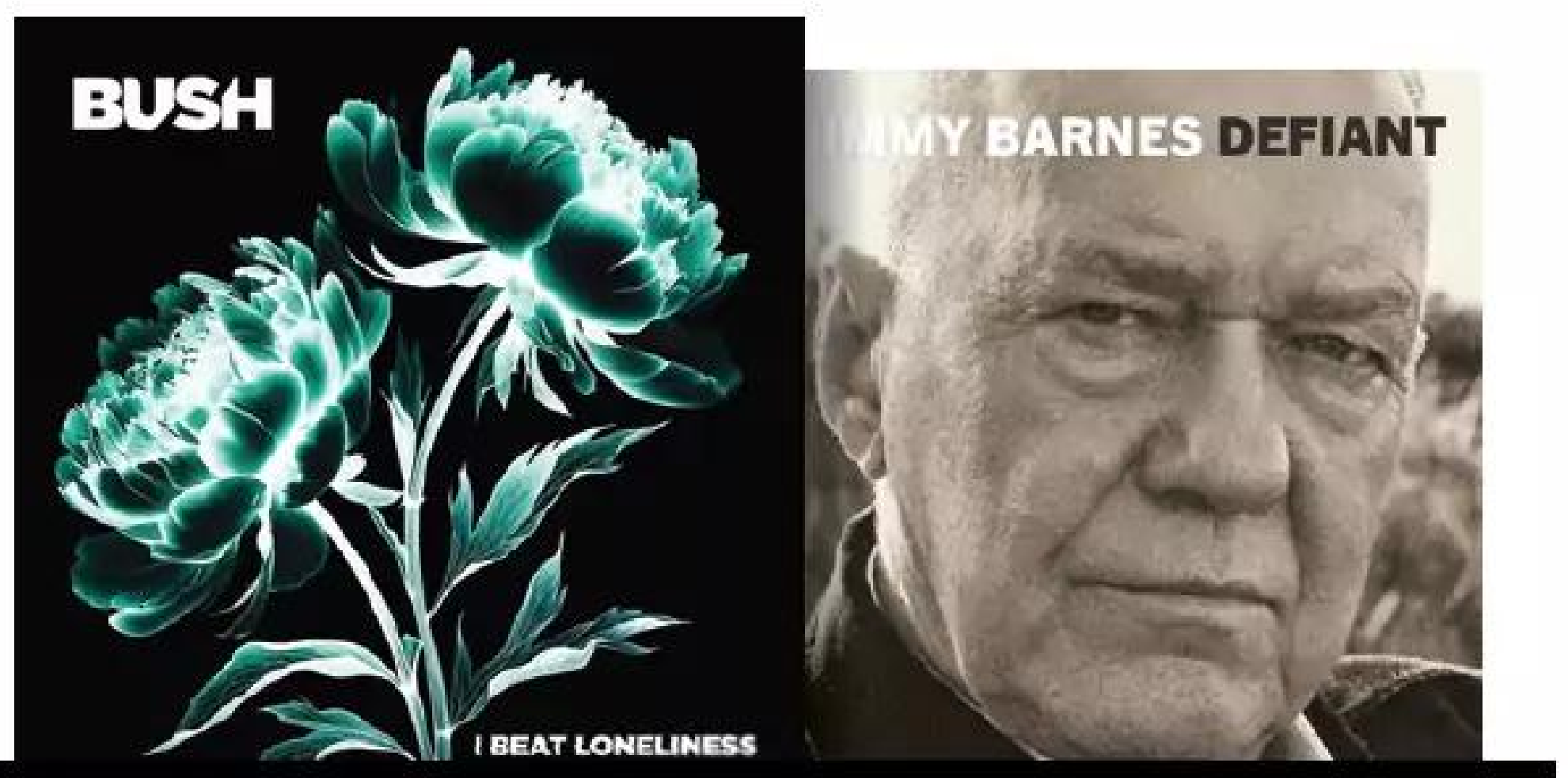
52 Apple 'Connect'
The fruit-based company is now the only one without 'proper' Wi-Fi streaming. Here we take a look at what an Apple Connect future could look like.

54 Obituary: Tom Waters
Former contributor to *Australian Hi-Fi*, Tom Waters, passed away in August. Greg Borrowman has penned some words to remember him by.

55 Hi-Fi Primer
Do you wish to eke out more performance from your system but don't have the budget? These nine easy and affordable upgrades will have it singing in no time.

70 Fyne Audio's Dr. Paul Mills interview
The Scottish speaker brand's technical director talks us through his hi-fi career and the intricacies of speaker design.

03 Editor's Lead-In
It's my first issue! Following Becky's departure back to Blighty, I sit down in the editor's chair as a long-time AV journalist and enthusiast.



Music

72 Top Picks
Bush are riding the 90s comeback wave with their 10th studio album, Joe Bonamassa continues to do what he does best on his 17th solo project, Aussie legend Jimmy Barnes is back with another record of belters, Polish outfit Atom Juice deliver a Pink Floyd-inspired prog/rock debut and Barry Gibb's son, Stephen Gibb, releases his debut effort with band, Kill The Robot.

82 Reissues
Seven (!) unreleased Bruce Springsteen albums see the light of day, Greg Lake of ELP fame's posthumous live album release is one for the fans, some of music biggest names pay tribute to Pink Floyd, The Grateful Dead's greatest hits celebrate their 60th anniversary and Chicago's second studio album gets the remastered treatment.

esoterica

62 E.A.T. F-Dur/F-Note Turntable & Tonearm
This stunning combination delivered one of the most "audibly perfect" performances we've ever come across.

66 Yamaha YH-4000 & Y-C3000 product focus
Yamaha's duo of audiophile headphones feature trickle down technology from the impressive YH-5000SE and are now available in Australia – this is everything you need to know about them.

HI-FI PRIMER: 9 AFFORDABLE WAYS TO UPGRADE YOUR HI-FI SYSTEM

australian hi-fi

SONIC PRECISION
On-ear cans make their mark

THE STRONGEST LINK
Marantz's reference-quality streaming preamp is truly aspirational

SILENT SPINNER
E.A.T. deck is "audibly perfect"

SOUND DESIGN
Ruark Audio system sounds as good as it looks

HOME GROWN HEROES
VAF standmounts deliver detail and dynamism

OUR FRONT COVER

Marantz has delivered a stunner with its new LINK 10n Streaming preamplifier. We've no doubt at all that new owner Harmon likes what it sees with this immensely impressive product, and so do we. It's the streaming preamp we'd be absolutely chuffed to own ourselves.

Love at first sight?

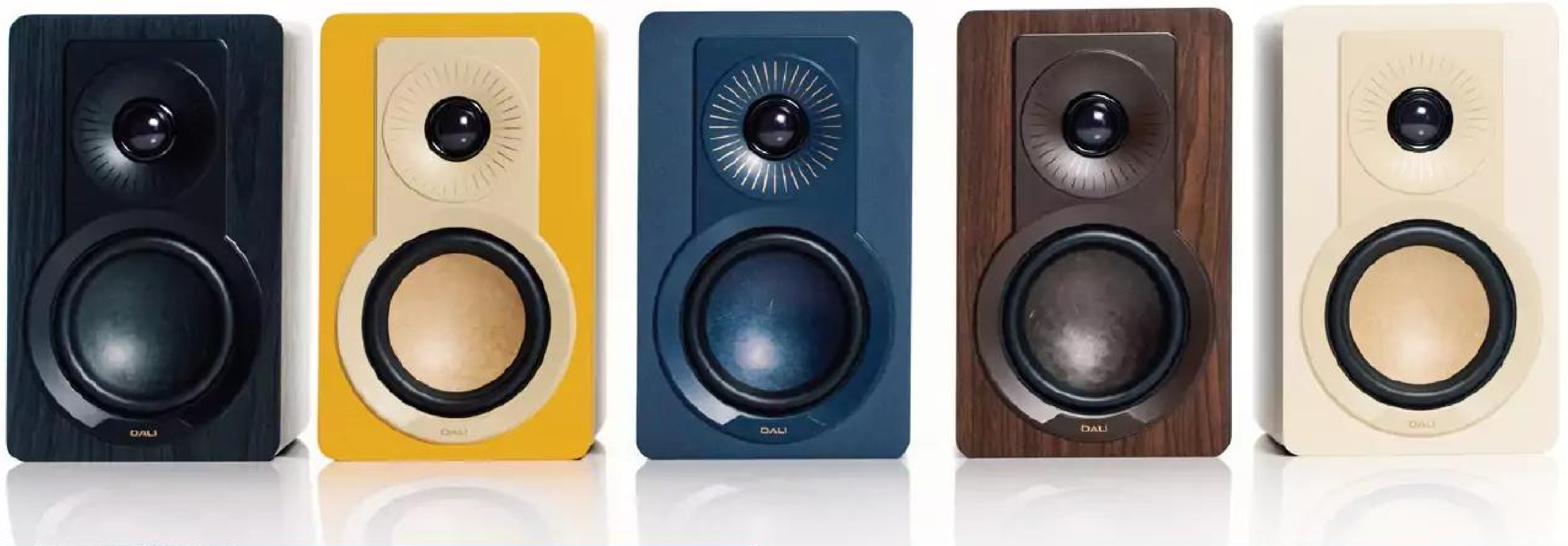
Danish loudspeaker maker Dali has announced a new affordable range of bookshelf speakers called Kupid. While the company's longstanding speaker ranges, such as Rubicon, Rubikore and Epikore adopt more conventional aesthetics, the Kupid arrives in a range of eye-catching colours. That includes the affectionately named Golden Yellow, Chilly Blue, Black Ash, Walnut and Caramel White, and at $599 a pair, Dali is aiming Kupid at a younger audience looking to take their first steps into hi-fi.

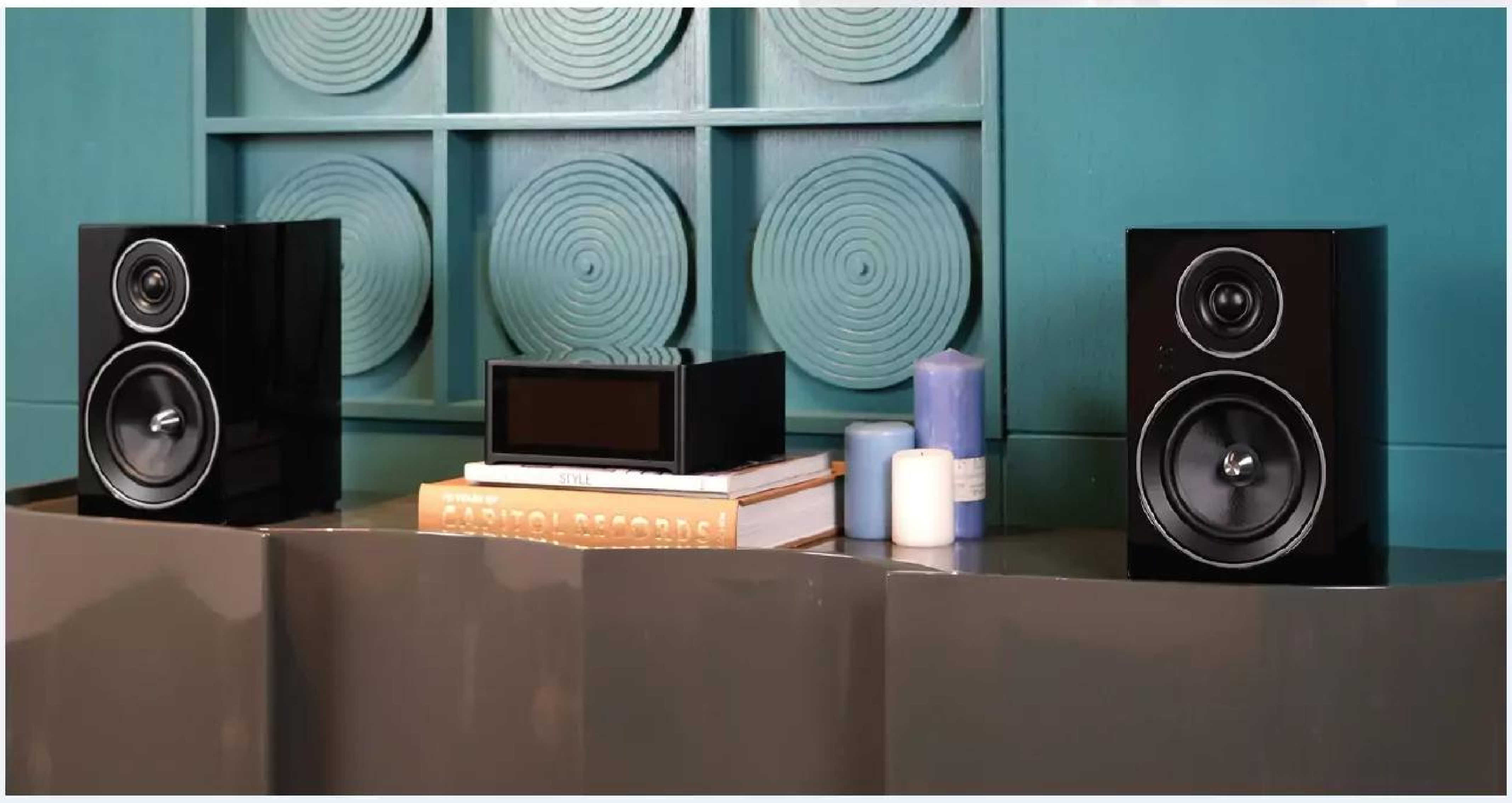
Despite the affordable price tag, Dali says Kupid is a "compact, high-performance loudspeaker that delivers true hi-fi sound". Indeed, the Danish outfit says Kupid shares much of the same DNA as its flagship speakers, with a keen focus on "precision, performance and musicality". Krestian Pedersen, Dali's Head of Product Management, adds that the company has "poured everything we know about speaker design into a form factor that's easy to live with and easy to love".

On the topic of being easy to live with, Kupid can supposedly be placed just one inch from a wall and still perform at their best. The speakers use a proprietary 4.5-inch paper and wood fibre bass/midrange driver with a ferrite magnet system and low-loss rubber surround to "ensure fast, tight bass and a dynamic midrange". A custom-developed 26mm soft dome tweeter promises "detailed, extended highs and minimal distortion". Further specifications include custom crossover and a "dual flare" bass reflex port for deep bass with low distortion.

Wall brackets and rubber feet are included, giving customers the freedom to wall-mount or place on stands, desktops or bookshelves.

For more information contact
Addicted to Audio on 1300 888 602
or at www.addictedtoaudio.com.au





Jammin' Jamo active speakers

Danish audio brand Jamo has been a little quiet of late, but is forging a return, spearheaded by the new C707PA MKII active speakers, the first release of a refreshed C700 series. Hoping to make Jamo's return a success is Audacity Australia, which has exclusive distribution rights.

As with previous releases from the company, this new bookshelf model is just as much about design as it is about substance. Of course, your options aren't exactly limited in the compact active speaker space in 2025 — just take a look at the Elac Debut ConneX DCB61 featured in our previous issue (#542, page 6) — so what is it about the Jamo C707PA MKII that deserves your attention? Firstly, it uses the brand's own Hybrid Composition Conical Cone (HCCC) driver, which has previously featured in Jamo's Concert 9 II Series speakers among many others. This driver employs what is known as a stiff-compliant-stiff (SCS) sandwich construction. This, says Jamo, sees the driver benefitting from a rigid outer layer, allowing it to be driven hard while remaining "clean and clear" and a damping core that serves up a smooth midrange.

Other technologies onboard include Long Displacement Surround (LDS) to further help lower distortion. Anti-Diffraction WaveGuide and Tweeter Distortion Reduction aim to provide natural-sounding higher frequencies. Jamo's own Aluminium Phase Plug is also present, which is designed to improve clarity in the higher frequencies and facilitate greater power handling. A three-band EQ switch is on the rear of the right speaker, which allows owners to tailor the sound output to their specific listening space, rather than rely on the default settings.

Powering the drivers in each speaker is a 65W Class D amplifier and, as is commonplace for desktop active speaker systems such as this, the right speaker is the brains of the show, hosting all connections and power, while the left takes on the 'dumb' role. Speaker cables are needed to connect the two together.

Connectivity is also what you'd expect for this style of system, with Bluetooth 5.0 for wireless streaming — complete with support for aptX and aptX lossless codecs — and HDMI ARC for connecting to a TV. USB Type-C, 3.5mm aux, optical digital and a RCA line-in round out your options for physically playing music.

The Jami C707PA MKII ships in five colour finishes (black, white, yellow, khaki green and blue) and is available now for $1,399.

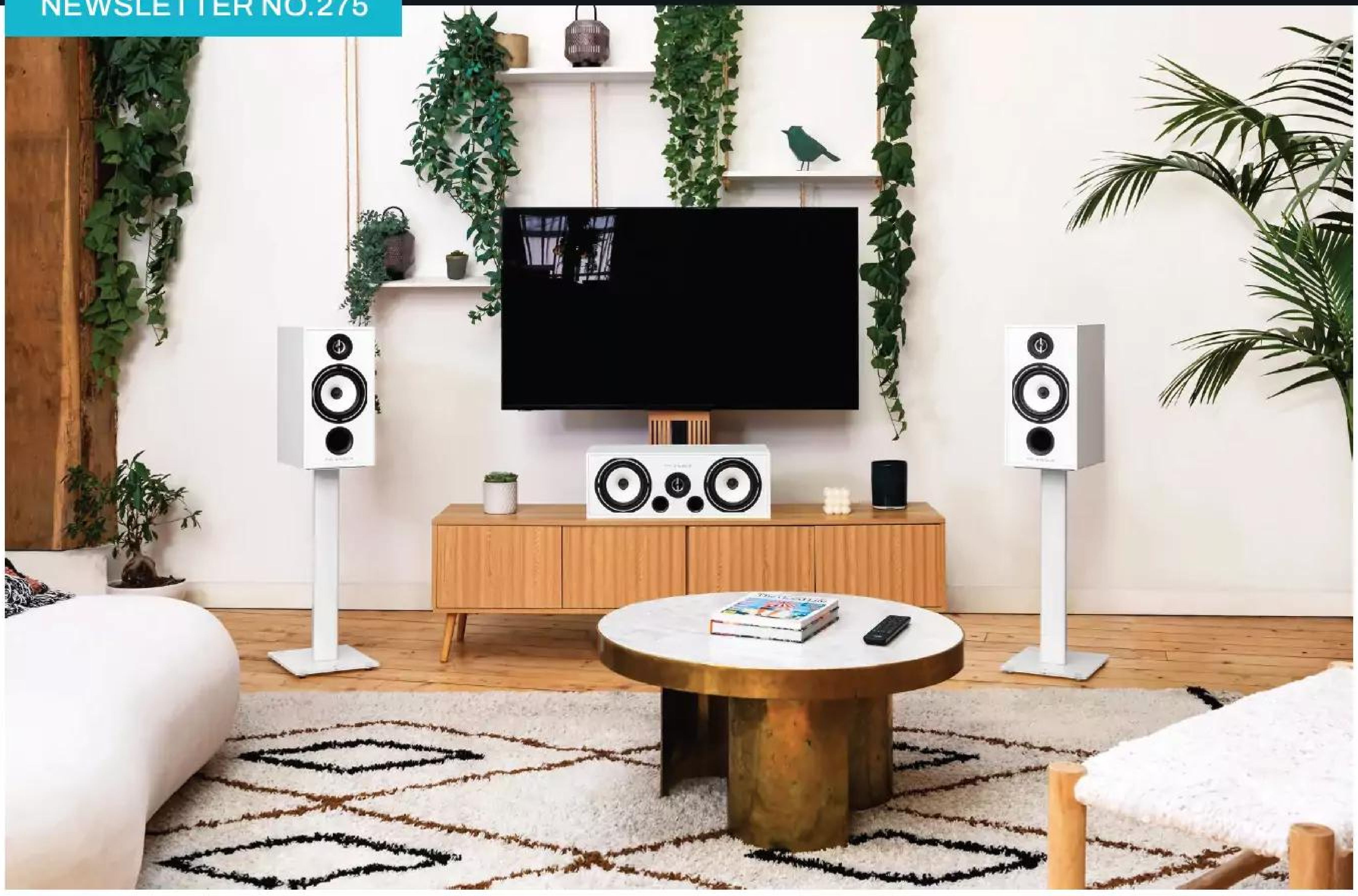
For more information, contact Audacity Australia on (03) 9645 3887 or at www.audacityaustralia.com.au

The Hi-Fi Headlines

NEW ARRIVALS AT LEN WALLIS AUDIO

LEN
WALLIS
AUDIO®

NEWSLETTER NO.275



Triangle Borea BR04 Bookshelf Speakers Price: $1,100 per pair

A few weeks ago, we received the Triangle Borea BR04 bookshelf speakers, a refined evolution of the popular BR03. Designed for superior performance in a compact, affordable package, the BR04 enhances bass response while preserving the Borea range's signature qualities of clarity and value.

Featuring the EFS silk-dome tweeter and a cellulose pulp midrange/bass driver, the BR04 delivers clear vocals and natural warmth. Available in six elegant finishes, it seamlessly fits any décor. Key upgrades include a redesigned front bass-reflex port and expanded cabinet for optimized airflow and deeper, controlled bass. Double binding posts and an improved crossover support bi-wiring and bi-amplification for greater precision.

With a frequency response of 44–22,000 Hz and 90 dB sensitivity, the BR04 excels in rooms from 10 to 40 m², offering rich, detailed sound for Hi-Fi and home theatre setups. Experience its versatile, immersive audio firsthand.

Ultimate Head-Fi Rig Package by Musical Fidelity

Buy Together and Save $1,075!

To unlock the full potential of your Meze 105 SILVA headphones, take advantage of the Ultimate Head-Fi Rig Package. While stocks last, bundle the Musical Fidelity MX- HPA headphone amp, MX-DAC, and MX-Stream with premium interconnects:

- Inakustik Premium 0.75m XLR Interconnect
- Inakustik Excellence 0.5m USB Interconnect

For just $4,300—a massive $1,075 saving off the individual RRP of $5,375. This package delivers precision sound and seamless connectivity, perfect for your dream headphone system. Don't miss out—stock is limited, and this offer won't last long!

Meze Audio 105 SILVA Headphones

Price: $999

We've also got our hands on the new Meze Audio 105 SILVA headphones, blending clarity and richness for a sound that captures music's divine essence—virtuosic finesse with raw, unrestrained fun. Fusing vintage charm with contemporary aesthetics, the radial grille and walnut wood ear cups create a timeless feel. Some key features include:

- Dual-focus sound signature.
- Sophisticated Modern design.
- 50 mm dynamic driver.
- Dual-twisted, Kevlar-wrapped OFC cable.
- Custom 3.5 mm to USB-C adapter with integrated DAC/AMP.

These headphones are built to showcase music's joy—visit us to and hear the difference they can make.

Why Upgrade Now?

Elevate your listening with the Triangle Borea BR04's enhanced bass and versatile design, ideal for any room. Pair the Meze Audio 105 SILVA's fun, detailed sound with our Ultimate Head-Fi Rig Package for unmatched headphone performance at a steal. Visit Len Wallis Audio to experience these arrivals and discover why we've been trusted since 1978. Transform your audio world today!

Scan and Visit
Lenwallisaudio.com

Yamaha goes back to its roots

Yamaha unleashed the world's first soundbar back in 2005 with the YSP-1, an innovative piece of home cinema equipment that, at the time, was a whole new concept. 20 years later, the Japanese audio brand has launched its latest model, the True X Surround 90A.

It's set to maximise cinematic scale and immersion, backed by over two decades of expertise and development – Yamaha says that this soundbar has been years in the making. It follows on from the True X lineup, which launched back in 2023, and which included the Bar 50A, Bar 40A and SW-X100A subwoofer, and the nifty True X Speaker X1A wireless surrounds, which could also be used as individual Bluetooth speakers. Jez Ford reviewed the True X Soundbar System for our sister mag, Sound + Image, in 2013, claiming it did an "excellent job, led by the clarity of the soundbar, supported by the attractive subwoofer, and expanded with the versatile little wireless rears".

The new Tru X Surround 90A has been redesigned, with a hefty main soundbar unit that houses no fewer than 19 drive units. There are four full-range, custom-designed, eye-shaped oval drivers, which Yamaha says deliver "rich midrange tones and impressive volume from fewer components, preserving sonic purity across the frequency range". These newly designed drivers, which are backed up by three tweeters for higher frequencies, have allowed Yamaha to condense the number of drivers in the soundbar without sacrificing clarity or introducing distortion.

However, it seems to be the opposite story when it comes to the height speakers, as Yamaha has upped the number of drivers compared to other models on the market. Whereas most Dolby Atmos soundbars make do with two up-firing units, Yamaha has implemented an array of top-mounted beam tweeters, with six drivers at each end of the soundbar. Yamaha's proprietary beam speaker technology, which is backed by its YDA-141 high-performance amplifier, is calibrated and angled to fire sound towards your ceiling with "remarkably accurate sound localisation". These height-focused beam speakers have been inherited from the YSP-1 – yes, that original soundbar from 20 years ago. The YSP-1 featured 40 beam-firing drive units, which bounced sound around your room to create a convincing surround effect. They exclusively handle height channels on the new system, and they're poised to do quite a remarkable job if Yamaha's claims are to be believed. According to the Japanese brand, the X90A's Dolby Atmos height effects will set the bar (pun intended) for the soundbar market as a whole; it even claims that they will rival dedicated ceiling-mounted speakers, with a "truly dynamic" and "authentic" three-dimensional sound experience.

Yamaha has also included new True X wireless speakers with this package. They look like stretched versions of the existing surrounds included on the current True X system, which disappointingly means that they don't feature upward-firing drivers. However, it looks like the height effect from the soundbar should handle this, so hopefully we needn't worry.

The final piece of Yamaha's new sonic puzzle is a brand-new wireless subwoofer. It sports a patented symmetrical flare port design, with both the inlet and outlet ports sharing an identical shape. They're connected to an internal plate that is integrated into the base of the sub, which allows for controlled airflow. Yamaha says it will deliver "powerful yet natural low-frequency reproduction", with minimised distortion and port noise.

The True X Surround 90A features a sleek design with a metal chassis and a built-in display; an appreciated addition, as we noted that the LED lights on the previous model were difficult to interpret at times. It supports Dolby Atmos and DTS:X, and Yamaha claims that it's the first soundbar to support the Auro 3D immersive audio format. It also includes the Surround: AI soundfield optimisation technology, which is found on Yamaha's AVR lineup, which can analyse content in real time to deliver the most immersive sound.

Connectivity-wise, you'll find HDMI eARC and HDMI passthrough (Yamaha has yet to confirm the specifications of this HDMI out socket), as well as optical. Wireless streaming is possible via Yamaha's MusicCast platform, as well as Bluetooth and Apple AirPlay.

The cost for the entire system? $4,499.

For more information, contact Yamaha on 1300 739 411 or at au.yamaha.com

Copper look at these!

Vivid Audio has announced a third generation of its iconic Giya loudspeakers — the Giya Cu. Comprising four models — the G4 Cu, G3 Cu, G2 Cu and G1S Cu — the new units mark an evolution of the Giya series, maintaining the instantly recognisable aesthetic, but seeing its enclosure updated to be lighter, stiffer and smoother in the pursuit of improved sound.

As the name implies, the headline feature in the Giya Cu speaker series is the use of copper as a material — Cu is the periodic symbol for copper — which is used for the copper-capped upper and lower midrange drivers, which were first developed for the mammoth Moya M1 flagship. Vivid Audio says the use of copper caps "lowers the 2nd and 3rd harmonic distortion, the latter by a very significant 20dB, resulting in not only a more palpable soundstage and overall cleaner midrange, but also a subjective improvement in bass response".

The company adds that it has redesigned the crossovers, added Moya-style driver grilles and has made the rear terminals more accessible. Other technologies carried over from other models include the company's core principles of a Catenary Dome profile, tapered tube loading on all drivers — the drivers are all designed in-house — and aerodynamically enhanced reaction cancelling ports.

While it might adopt the largest number, the G4 Cu is actually the smallest model in the range, followed by the G3, G2 and finally the G1S Cu (or, G1 Spirit) as the flagship. In the two smaller models, the tapered tubes are now integrated within the main enclosure, resulting in a cleaner appearance that more closely matches the larger G2 and G1S.

As with other models in Vivid's range, each Giya Cu loudspeaker is crafted by hand at the company's facility in Durban, South Africa by a team of 35 employees.

Australian pricing is yet to be confirmed, but in Europe the range is priced as follows: Vivid Audio G1S Cu €95,000, G2 Cu €55,000, G3 Cu €43,000, G4 Cu €34,000. Converted at the time of writing, you're looking at anywhere between $60,000 to $170,000.

For more information, contact Avation on (07) 5580 3300 or visit www.avation.com.au

Keep on spinnin'

Providing yet more proof that CDs are still a long way off surrendering to the convenience of streaming, Japanese brand Luxman has introduced the high-end D-03R CD player. The new model replaces the D-03X and rather than adopting just a new name and a couple of iterative upgrades, the D-03R actually represents a rather thorough redesign.

Aesthetically, there's little to separate the two models; it's under the hood where the changes have been made. Perhaps the headline change is the replacement of the Texas Instruments DAC chips with dual ROHM BD34352EKV chips, which operate in a fully balanced dual-mono configuration. Luxman says this upgrade results in a "leap in resolution and musicality".

To further help ensure your prized CD collection can sound its best — the D-03R supports MQA-CD and SACD — Luxman has opted for a fully balanced output amplifier with differential I/V conversion — essentially meaning the signal is handled in balanced form from the DAC chip all the way to the analogue outputs — which is said to deliver a "cleaner, more dynamic sound".

The transport has also received an upgrade, switching from an aluminium mounting base used in the previous model and replacing it with a 3.2mm thick steel alternative. This should, in theory, provide a more rigid base to reduce vibrations and allow for improved reading accuracy of your discs.

Power supplies are, of course, just as important and Luxman evidently knows this all too well, as it's redesigned the one for the D-03R. In this latest model, the Japanese company has employed high-capacity block capacitors rated at 6,600 µF x2 for the DAC section — double that of the previous D-03X.

Connections include coaxial and S/PDIF optical inputs, alongside USB-B for hooking up a computer. The internal DAC section supports high-resolution files up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512 via USB. Outputs include unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR, alongside another output each for coaxial and optical.

Further updates have been made to the front panel, specifically the display, which is now OLED to improve readability from a distance. The overall aesthetic remains largely unchanged, with the unit being available in white aluminium.

The Luxman D-03R is available now via Audio Active for $8,299.

For more information, contact Audio Active on (03) 9699 8900 or at www.audioactive.com.au

Resurrecting an icon

Following its first foray into soundbars recently, British hi-fi brand KEF is now taking aim at the more cost-friendly end of the powered speaker market with the Coda W.

While the brand clearly has the know-how when it comes to wireless speaker systems thanks to the likes of the LS50 Wireless II and LSX II, this latest system builds on KEF's long-running Coda range, which started life in the 1970s and made hi-fi sound more accessible. Clearly we're not in the 1970s anymore, and as such the Coda W is packed with all the modern smarts a budding hi-fi enthusiast could wish for, while also recognising the Coda range's illustrious heritage.

Key to what could make the Coda W a success is a dedicated phono input that instantly makes the wireless system the only thing you'd need to begin their hi-fi journey. Plus it works with all sorts of other devices such as TVs and games consoles. Inside is a 5.25-inch 12th-generation Uni-Q driver array, which KEF claims delivers a "remarkably detailed performance". The company has been producing Uni-Q drivers for decades, so it has plenty of expertise in this area. The tweeter is positioned at the acoustic centre of the woofer to recreate how sound is produced naturally, giving uniform dispersion throughout the room for a more natural listen. With 200 watts of total power and dedicated amplifiers for both the tweeters and woofers in each speaker, you can expect room-filling sound from the relatively small cabinets.

KEF's Musical Integrity Engine — a suite of DSP algorithms — has been specially tuned for Coda W for greater detail and accuracy in the sound. Bluetooth 5.4 with aptX Adaptive is also on board for low-latency wireless audio with a robust connection, while aptX Lossless supports CD-quality audio up to 16-bit/44.1kHz. It's perhaps a little surprising that the Coda W doesn't support higher-resolution audio files, but it's still a noticeable step up from non-lossless codecs. You connect Coda W to a turntable using the integrated phono pre-amplifier, or RCA input for those record players with a built-in phono pre-amp. There's an HDMI ARC port for hooking it up to your TV too, plus a subwoofer output for connecting a dedicated sub. A USB Type-C port lets you use it as a desktop speaker system with your computer, and RCA and optical connections allow you to connect CD players, Blu-ray players and games consoles, adding even more versatility. Control is via buttons on the top of one of the units, or you can fire up the KEF Connect mobile app for more customisation options such as tweaking the equaliser.

It's a good-looking system too, thanks to its clean lines and minimalist aesthetic, helped in no small part by its choice of five finishes: Vintage Burgundy, Nickel Grey, Moss Green, Midnight Blue, or Dark Titanium. It comes with a 3-metre interspeaker cable, or you can buy an extra 8-metre C-Link interspeaker cable to give you more placement options over a wider area. The speakers are also compatible with the SQ1 floor stands. The KEF Coda W is on sale now for $1,450 per pair.

For more information, contact Advance Aydio on (02) 9561 0799 or at www.advanceaudio.com.au

Small but precise

High-end Swiss audio manufacturer Nagra has officially launched its Compact series of components in Australia, following an international release in 2024. The four-strong Compact range has been designed and priced to be more accessible than many of Nagra's other products, which can cost upwards of $20,000 and often well into six figures. They are the Streamer ($7,995), Compact Phono ($7,995), Compact PSU ($5,795) and Compact VFS, a scaled-down version of the company's VFS acoustic isolation base, at $2,195.

The Streamer is Nagra's first and was first shown off at High End Munich last year. It supports Tidal, Qobuz and Spotify in their Connect guises, is Roon Ready and Roon Tested, works with Audirvana and supports AirPlay 2 and streaming from networked servers.

The Compact Phono, meanwhile, draws upon Nagra's expertise since its first hi-fi product launch, the Nagra PL-P, back in 1997. This new phono stage supports MC cartridges, and utilises a hand-wound Nagra transformer with 10dB gain. While it does ship with an external power supply, customers may wish to upgrade to the Compact PSU "to achieve even greater performance".

Both the Streamer and Compact Phono share the same 18.5 x 16.6 x 4.1cm footprint, while the Compact PSU comes in at 16 x 19.1 x 6.1cm — you should have little trouble finding space on an equipment rack for them, then!

The Compact VFS is compatible with any of the three models and the entire Nagra Compact series is available now.

For more information, contact Audio Active on (03) 9699 8900 or at www.audioactive.com.au

Kaleidescape Strato E Movie Player

Kaleidescape's new entry-level 4K movie player. Providing lossless audio and reference-quality 4K video output, Strato E works on its own or as part of a larger Kaleidescape system.

- Entry-level movie player with 4K video output.
- **Lossless spatial audio.** Clear dialog and immersive sound effects.
- **Reference video for every 4K display.** SDR, HDR10, and Dolby Vision.
- **Standalone.** Includes 480GB solid-state storage.
- **Scalable.** Add a server for more movies on demand and more players for whole-house entertainment.

audio active AUSTRALIA

Distributed by Audio Active Australia **www.audioactive.com.au** Phone: (03) 9699 8900 Find a Dealer ▶

Image courtesy of Paradise Theater. TV | Red Theory | Station Earth. All copyrights, trademarks, and logos are property of their respective owners.
All content featured is available for purchase or rent from the Kaleidescape US movie store. Content availability varies by territory.

Old form, new function

Sennheiser has announced its first set of audiophile-grade headphones in the HD 600 series, the HDB 630. The new cans are positioned as the brand's "first high-res audiophile wireless product" and aim to combine the "unmatched audiophile precision" of the HD6 range with the portable convenience of the Momentum wireless range.

On that note, if you think you've seen them somewhere before, it's because they use the same chassis as the Momentum 4 over-ears. The chassis is the only thing they share, however, as Sennheiser has integrated a new 42mm dynamic transducer (made in-house at its Ireland production facility) and acoustic treatments to deliver an "effortlessly agile listen" that is "true to the vibe that left the mastering studio".

The HDB 630 supports high-res audio up to 24-bit/96kHz, and you can deliver it to the headphones via a USB-C cable in wired mode, or wirelessly thanks to aptX Adaptive support.

Alternatively, and in a bid to ensure that everyone can enjoy hi-res audio on these new wireless headphones anywhere, Sennheiser includes a BTD 700 USB-C Bluetooth transmitter in the box, which grants hi-res streaming to smartphones and tablets that don't natively support the higher-quality aptX HD codecs. This tiny dongle device lets you stream music at up to 24-bit/96kHz quality using the aptX Adaptive codec, which offers higher resolution and greater data transfer than the standard Bluetooth codec found on, say, an iPhone. This transmitter also adapts according to your environment – for instance, scaling the resolution down if you're in a congested area to ensure the Bluetooth connection remains stable with minimal dropouts.

Inside the earcups, the 42mm drivers feature a "refined" acoustic design that balances the headphones' compact form with ample air flow behind the transducer. The headphones have undergone "pure audiophile tuning" to deliver a smoother response in the upper midrange and lower treble areas, with a claimed frequency range of 6Hz to 40kHz.

Sennheiser has also made the HDB 630 to be as customisable as possible within the Smart Control Plus app. Not only will you find common features such as 5-band EQ adjustment and preset sound modes, but it also includes a Crossfeed feature, inspired by the flagship HE 1. Crossfeed allows you to blend the left and right channels — when dealing with classic mono recordings or "hard-panned mixes", for instance – for a more "speaker-like" presentation that might be easier on the ears.

Also on hand is a Parametric Equaliser that allows for much finer tuning than traditional EQ interfaces. With this feature, users have complete control over bandwidth and filter types and they can access an A/B toggle. What's more, custom presets can then be shared with other HDB 630 owners.

As was the case with the similar-looking Momentum 4s, the Sennheiser HDB 630 can last up to 60 hours on a single charge, and are good for 7 hours from just 10 minutes plugged into the mains.

Adaptive noise cancellation is of course onboard, while the ear cups are coated in a Japanese Protein Leatherette for comfort and durability.

The Sennheiser HDB 630 are available now for $999.

For more information, contact Sonova Hearing at www.sonova.com

Refining a proven performer

Arcam has unveiled a refreshed trio of integrated amplifiers, with the A5+, A15+ and A25+ building upon the success of the original models, which launched in 2023.

The new amps aim to "raise the bar even higher", with updated circuitry, refined components, better power management and new features offering an "enhanced performance."

If you're a fan of the looks of the current range of integrated amps, you'll be pleased to know that for the new "Plus" range, Arcam has retained the minimal black design with yellow accents. The fundamental power ratings and main specifications of each amplifier remain the same.

So what's new? The A15+ and A25+ now feature an HDMI eARC input, which will be welcome news for those who want to add them to a TV/home cinema set-up.

Additionally, the Bluetooth chip has been updated to Bluetooth 5.4 across all three models, bringing with it the higher-quality aptX Lossless codec, LE Audio and the Auracast sharing protocol.

The A5+ features refinements to the internal components and a lower power supply impedance, while the A15+ and A25+ have a transformer upgrade that reduces unwanted current within the chassis.

The A25+ has further upgrades to the new transformer, better linear regulation to the analogue power supplies, and further refinements to the power and mains filtering to "enhance overall clarity", claims Arcam.

The A25+ Class G amplifier (100W per channel) also has an additional, dedicated ESS9018 DAC for the SPDIF inputs and has a precision-cut glass front panel, which offers a sharper, brighter display. This should bring it in line, visually, with the partnering ST25 streamer.

The A5+ remains a 50W per channel amplifier, while the A15+ offers more grunt with 80W per channel – both are Class A/B designs, and feature a 24-bit/192kHz ESS ES9018 DAC, a built-in moving magnet phono stage and 3.5mm headphone port.

The A5 and A15 amps aren't short of competition, with multiple similarly priced models arriving in the last couple of years, so Arcam is perhaps just ensuring it remains at the front end of the pack.

As for pricing information, the trio launches at $100 more than their predecessor in each case. That means the A5+ retails for $1,595, the A15+, $2,295 and the range-topping A25+ will set you back $3,295.

For more information, contact Advance Audio on (02) 9561 0799 or at www.advanceaudio.com.au

The return of a speaker legend

Who would have thought that when the Acoustic Energy AE1 bookshelf speakers launched back in 1987, they would become one of the debut products that defined hi-fi history.

They're regarded in such high esteem that Acoustic Energy is bringing the compact boxes back with its AE1 40th Anniversary Edition model, which is a "reimagined version" aiming to bring together a classic design with modern engineering, "while preserving the sonic character that made the original a legend".

"We had to examine where we could improve upon the original while retaining the character which made it such a big hit for decades. The AE1 40th is a faithful evolution, not a simple reissue," says Mat Spandl, Managing Director.

Obviously, Acoustic Energy couldn't just build the new model using old components, but it did strip down the original to cast an eye over the design and see where potential improvements could be made. The results have been significant revisions to both drivers.

Firstly, there's an all-new aluminium tweeter with a larger voice coil (29mm versus 25mm on the original AE1) and the addition of a large rear chamber to absorb the rearward energy and keep vibrations low.

Secondly, the bass driver gets a slightly larger 12.5cm spun and hard-anodised cone with an aluminium shorting ring to reduce distortion.

Each cabinet features 10 layers of gloss paint and uses an HDF version of Acoustic Energy's RSC technology, which has been "tuned to mimic the acoustic characteristics of the original cabinet".

A knock-on effect of the cabinet construction is that the company has been able to free up half a litre of internal volume to complement the larger bass driver.

With that bigger driver, you'd be forgiven for thinking the speakers have been beefed up in terms of size, but actually, the dimensions of the new speaker remain the same as the old model: 29.5 x 18 x 24cm (HWD).

The new Acoustic Energy AE1 40th Anniversary Edition speakers cost $3,100 per pair and are available in a High Gloss Black or Walnut veneer. Keep your eyes peeled for a review in a future issue.

For more information, contact
M&G Hoskins on (02) 9597 3683
or at www.mghoskins.com.au

Glow and behold

Pro-Ject has announced the launch of two new phono stages, the compact Pro-Ject Tube Box E and the balanced Tube Box S3 B.

Let's start with the more premium of the two. The Tube Box S3 B is a valve-based balanced phono stage that seeks to blend high-end technologies with an extensive range of connection options housed within a compact design, with Pro-Ject promising a model which "raises the bar in the premium analogue market".

Central to the new unit is its symmetrical discrete gain stage which, when coupled with a balanced-ready turntable, maintains a balanced signal path for reducing noise and preserving musical detail.

The Tube Box S3 B offers a wide array of gain options from 40–65dB, meaning it can cope with moving magnet and moving coil cartridges. There are control switches for changing the input or toggling the subsonic filter, something which Pro-Ject envisions will make the Tube Box S3 B easier to use.

The new phono stage is housed in an aluminium enclosure to protect against unwanted interference, showcasing twin input options for connecting dual turntables – one balanced and one unbalanced – with stored settings for switching easily between the two. If you're seeking something a little more affordable, the Tube Box E might be suitable. Despite its small footprint and more modest price tag, the Tube Box E features a fully discrete, dual-mono design, resulting in reduced noise from a design which Pro-Ject claims produces a "musical sound with a rich midrange".

Offering a wide range of gain settings, the Tube Box E supports a broad spectrum of moving magnet and moving coil cartridges. Capacitance and impedance can be adjusted, while a front-mounted subsonic filter provides further scope for tweaking your sound to your liking.

Pro-Ject's more affordable phono stage is fitted with a metal enclosure for protecting against interference and vibrations, as well as an aluminium front panel and gold-plated RCA sockets. Both new models are available now, with the Tube Box S3 B priced at $1,149 and the Tube Box E priced at $599.

For more information contact
Interdyn on
(03) 9426 3600 or at
www.interdyn.com.au

Fresh French flair

French audio brand Triangle has announced the Capella 2, an updated version of its Triangle Capella wireless active speaker system that debuted in 2024, which arrived with the aim to outmuscle similarly premium systems from the likes of KEF and Sonus faber. The first major change for this second-gen system is a revamped Stereo Hub 2 network player, which now includes native support for Spotify Connect Lossless and Tidal Connect, both of which were conspicuously absent from the first-generation system at launch.

The hub also gains an ethernet port for more stable and responsive network connections, along with the existing Wi-Fi connectivity for those who'd rather do away with more cables.

Another notable addition is a dedicated subwoofer output, adjustable via Triangle's Capella app, allowing users to add low-frequency reinforcement to the system. The hub itself is powered by a Cortex A53 Quad-Core processor running at 1.5GHz, which Triangle claims delivers improved responsiveness compared to the original.

The speakers retain the WiSA wireless tech that connects them to the hub, promising very low latency while supporting hi-res audio up to 24-bit/96kHz.

Each speaker packs 100W of Class D bi-amplification, with separate amplifiers and DACs for the 25mm magnesium alloy horn tweeter, and 165mm natural cellulose pulp mid/bass driver.

Triangle has also expanded the connectivity options to include HDMI eARC with CEC support (previously just ARC support) and a 3.5mm input, while the three optical inputs, plus coaxial, USB-B, RCA stereo are carried over from before. Wireless options include Bluetooth 5.2, AirPlay 2, Chromecast, and UPnP/DLNA, along with Roon Ready certification. The system offers automatic room calibration via iOS devices or Triangle's optional Zen microphone, along with manual EQ adjustment through the app. Elsewhere, there's a new USB-C rechargeable remote control, making for quick and easy top-ups.

Aesthetically, the Capella 2 introduces three new finishes – Space Black, English Green, and Oak – joining the existing Astral Blue and Space White options. European pricing for the Triangle Capella 2 is €2,499, with Australian pricing to be confirmed. Considering the first-generation is priced at $5,500, I'd imagine the updated model will arrive at a similar price point when it lands in early 2026. The same, optional S05 speaker stands are compatible with the new system and maintain their $600 price tag.

For more information, contact Audio Marketing on (02) 9882 3877 or visit www.audiomarketing.com.au

Peak performance

French audio manufacturer Advance Paris is celebrating its 30th anniversary with the arrival of its Apex series, a premium range of amplifiers and hi-fi components designed to bring together a potent blend of "form, function and value".

The new range comprises four models: the A8 Apex, A10 Apex and A12 Apex integrated amplifiers, as well as the ACD Apex CD player.

Each amplifier in the range uses Advance Paris's hybrid valve and transistor topology, aiming to deliver "precise dynamics, clarity, and detail".

The Apex amps introduce upgrades over the brand's more affordable Classic range, including lower noise power supplies, ESS Technology voltage regulators, and premium components such as resistors and capacitors.

The A8 Apex and A10 Apex deploy a ESS9018 DAC, while the flagship A12 Apex goes a step further with the higher-end ESS9039 model, for what Advance describes as "ultimate audio fidelity". All three of the aforementioned amplifiers offer HDMI eARC, meaning they can be integrated into a fledging home cinema system.

The new amplifiers also offer Bluetooth streaming from compatible source devices, with the A10 and A12 Apex offering Bluetooth out, should you want to connect your amplifier to a pair of compatible Bluetooth headphones or wireless speakers.

Let's not forget the ACD Apex CD player, which harnesses analogue tube outputs for a "warm sound and authentic musicality". Analogue connections come in the shape of XLR and RCA analogue outputs, as well as coaxial and optical outputs on the digital side.

According to Cédric Leon, Advance Paris's Product Director: "The Apex range represents three decades of French audio engineering and our commitment to constantly refining our craft. This new range that honours our legacy while setting a new standard for ourselves going into the future."

Australian pricing is yet to be confirmed, but UK pricing is as follows: A8 Apex amp £1,975 (approx $3,730), A10 Apex amp £2,450 (approx $4,630), A12 Apex amp £3,400 (approx $6,420), ACD Apex CD player £890 (approx $1,680).

For more information, contact Synergy Audio Visual on (03) 9459 7474 or at www.synergyaudio.com

IN LOVE WITH
SOUND SINCE '78

VAF DC-2S Bookshelf/Stand Mount Speaker

WELCOME TO THE VAF AUTHENTIC AUDIO EXPERIENCE

The DC-2S stand mount or bookshelf VAF loudspeaker offers true high-fidelity performance and incredible value for money. In keeping with the great VAF tradition, we have developed the best performing VAF DC range bookshelf speaker in our storied history.

The VAF DC-2S is available in four great décor colours – Natural Oak, Black Oak, Jarrah Coloured Oak and Brown Oak. A combination of style and great authentic musical sound, all at a price that won't break the bank.

SCAN TO FIND
OUT MORE

CONTACT: 52-54 North Terrace Kent Town SA 5067 **E** vaf@vaf.com.au **P** 08 8363 9996

Harman seals the deal

Following an announcement in May, Samsung-owned Harman has finalised its deal to acquire some of the biggest names in hi-fi.

It has taken over Masimo's Sound United stable of brands, which encompasses Bowers & Wilkins, Denon, Marantz, Polk Audio, Definitive Technology, Classé, HEOS and Boston Acoustics. The deal gives Harman – which has been owned by Samsung Electronics since 2016 – quite the catalogue of brands in its stable, as it already owns Arcam, AKG, JBL, Mark Levinson and Revel.

As a result, Harman has an even broader spread of devices across all sorts of audio categories, including home audio, electronics, headphones and in-car audio.

"Harman's vision is to create experiences that enrich people's lives through exceptional audio experiences," said Dave Rogers, president of Harman's Lifestyle Division. "Sound United's impressive roster of brands is rooted in a deep passion for sound, innovation, and commitment to quality that aligns with Harman's own values."

Customers shouldn't notice any immediate changes, as Sound United will operate as a standalone Strategic Business Unit (SBU) within Harman's Lifestyle Division. This, it's claimed, will mean that each brand's "heritage, expertise and loyal customer base remain central to their identity."

And with Harman's extra resources, the company says its new brands "will gain greater reach with enhanced capabilities, while continuing to realise their distinct goals and better succeed in the marketplace." As for the presence of Sound United brands in Australia, Dave Rogers added "We do not anticipate any changes to the way they do business in any of the markets, including Australia."

My UK colleague and *What Hi-Fi?* Deputy Editor, Andy Madden, thinks it's a good move for both parties. He adds, "Harman has the know-how, ably backed by Samsung, while Sound United has three of the biggest brands in the audio business that need stability following a tumultuous few years with Masimo."

We're keen to see what the future holds for the full lineup of brands under Harman's ownership. Could we see engineers from multiple brands collaborating on one 'Frankenstein' set of speakers? Only time will tell.

Marantz LINK 10n

Streaming Preamplifier

- Superb sound
- Insane build quality and looks
- HEOS ecosystem

- Nothing of significance

RRP **$19,000**

Marantz is a unique audio brand because although it's been owned by multiple different owners (and companies) during its 70-year history, it's always taken pride of place in those companies' as a premium 'flagship' brand, even if those companies had other brands in their stables. At the time of going to press, Marantz is in the process of being purchased by US-based Harman International, which is itself a subsidiary of Samsung, but it appears that despite the new ownership, Marantz's premium products will continue to be built entirely in Japan, at a dedicated production facility located in Shirakawa approximately 185 kilometres northeast of Tokyo. This facility (Shirakawa Audio Works) has been building Marantz's reference-line products since 2002 as well as manufacturing for other brands like Denon and Classé.

The purchase by Harman means, however, that Marantz will perhaps for the first time have to share the limelight with some other prestigious brands, because Harman also owns JBL, Harman Kardon, AKG, Lexicon, Infinity and Mark Levinson.

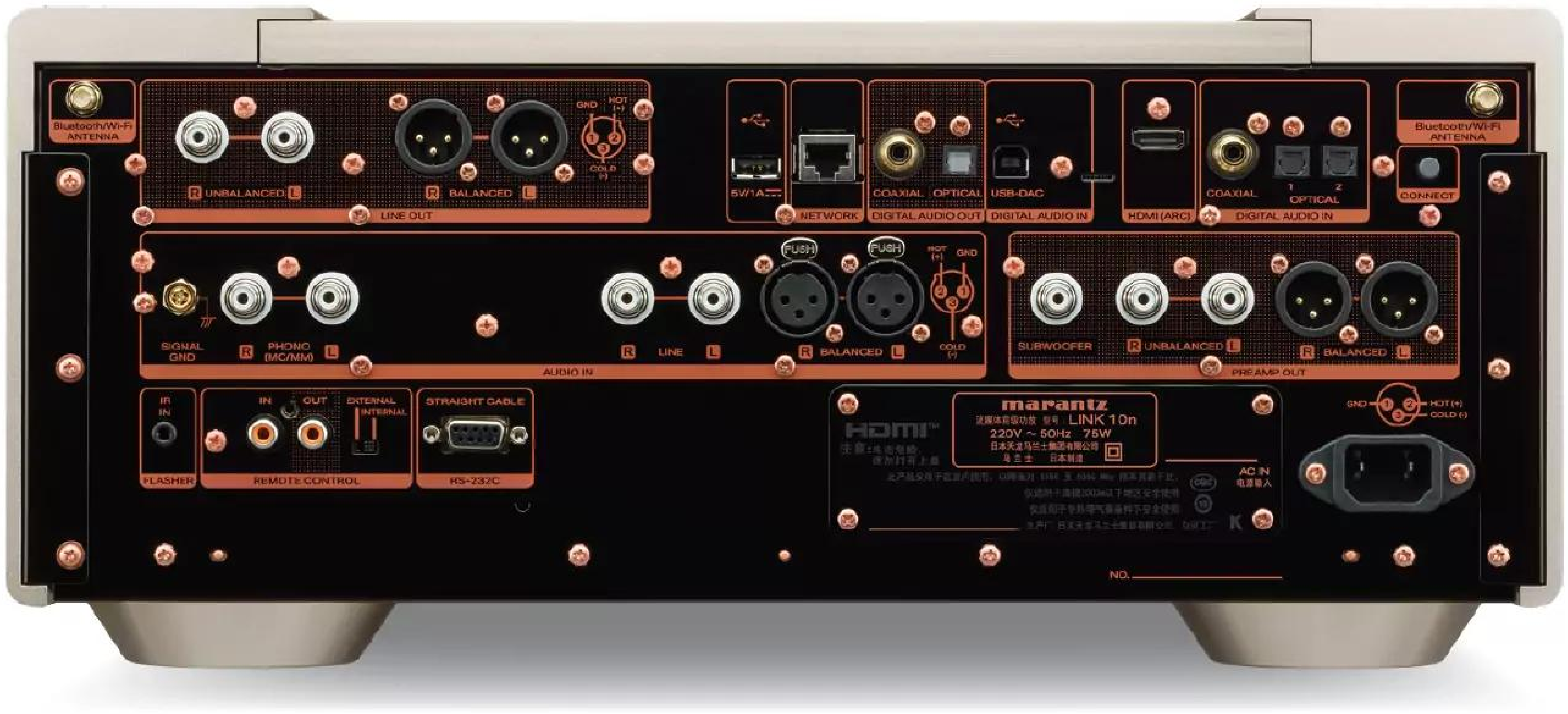
THE EQUIPMENT

The Marantz LINK 10n Streaming preamplifier (it's also a DAC, by the way) is one of three new so-called 'Reference Standard' components made by Marantz, the other two being the SACD 10 Reference SACD Player, and the Model 10 Reference Integrated Amplifier.

All three components are essentially the same size and shape, and all are cosmetically similar, in that they have 'layered' front panels, with the main front panel fronted by a smaller one that sits proud of it. The main front panel is not flat, but has shell-like scallops engraved into it. The space between the two front panels has in-built hidden illumination, which spills out to make the small panel appear to 'float' in midair. Looking from front-on, the combination of the scallops and the lighting make it look like ocean waves are surrounding the panel, while viewed from an angle, the pattern becomes more like a venetian blind. All models are available in 'Marantz Black' or 'Marantz Champagne' finishes.

The simplicity of the front panel rather understates the capabilities of the LINK 10n because although you can control quite a few of its operations and functions with the two obvious front panel controls (input selector to the left, volume control to the right) and with the two much-smaller, almost invisible, joystick-like controls (multiple functions including track play/pause, track skip forward/back, favourites selection, menu options and much more) and with the infra-red remote control, it's primarily intended to be used in conjunction with the HEOS app, which I'll discuss later.

At the centre of the LINK 10n's front panel is a large, full-colour, high-resolution OLED display that will, for most of the time when you're using it, show album artwork, album name and track details, playback format (WAV, FLAC etc), track timings (elapsed, remaining, etc), sampling rates, bit depths and more, but also doubles as a 'toolbox' menu that will allow you to set



maximum playback levels, digital filter options, noise-shaping options, dithering options and more. I'll discuss all these in more detail later in this review.

What music sources can the new LINK 10n handle? It would be quicker to list the sources it can't handle, because off-hand, I can't think of any it can't! Obviously, with the word 'streamer' in its model name, it will handle pretty much any digital signal you can source from the Internet, your home network, network attached storage, USB stick or SSD, but there's more again. You can input an SPDIF digital signal from another DAC or a CD or SACD player, either wired or optically, and it can handle analogue signals (balanced or unbalanced) plus you can connect a turntable to its phono inputs, which can be configured for moving-coil or moving-magnet operation. You can also connect HDMI ARC.

Output-wise, you have choice of preamp or line outputs (both available with balanced and/or unbalanced connections), there is also a dedicated subwoofer output (with switchable filtering) and finally, there are dedicated digital outputs as well (coaxial and optical).

HEOS APP

HEOS (it's an acronym for Home Entertainment Operating System) allows you to use a smart device to stream music between compatible HEOS devices (of which the LINK 10n is one) via Wi-Fi. Once enabled, you can stream music from Amazon Music, Pandora, SoundCloud, Spotify, Tidal, Qobuz, Deezer, and TuneIn internet radio amongst others.

Some notable absences include Apple Music and Mixcloud. I personally don't use any of these streaming services, but if one or more of them is important to you, it could be accessed on another device and sent to the LINK 10n via UPnP (using Jriver on a PC, say), or by using AirPlay 2 or Bluetooth.

HEOS also enables you to use your smart device to access and distribute music from locally stored content on media servers, computers or anything connected to your home network. However, you can also stream music to or from any HEOS-enabled hi-fi component, such as a CD or SACD player or wireless loudspeakers… virtually any component that has HEOS onboard, so it doesn't have to be a Marantz product… many Denon products will also integrate into the HEOS ecosystem. Although Wi-Fi is the preferred wireless format to use with HEOS, because it can handle uncompressed music files, which are superior in quality to files delivered via Bluetooth, HEOS can also stream via Bluetooth if that's what you want.

It's also possible to integrate HEOS with voice control systems such as Alexa and Google Assistant if you'd prefer (or for whatever reason require) hands-free control of your audio system.

Using HEOS also gives you access to multiple functions that are not available by using the front panel controls or those on the supplied infra-red remote control — functions such as tone control adjustment, channel balance, display brightness levels… it's pretty much a 'one-stop-shop' that enables complete control of your music.

Although HEOS was originally associated with Denon, Marantz adopted the technology when the two companies came to be under the same ownership in 2002. However, HEOS was developed not by Denon, but by a small Australian company called Avega Systems which was founded in Sydney in 2005. The software had its first major overhaul in 2014 and then a second major overhaul in 2023. The 2023 release (codenamed U32 to indicate there had been 32 major upgrades since 2014), saw the introduction of HEOS Version 3, which in turn has been further upgraded, such that the current release (as least at the time of writing) is V3.88.171.

Almost all of the upgrades to the app have been to align the graphic user interface so that it functions in the same way that almost all modern phones function, with elements positioned on the screen where you'd expect to find them, and swiping works the same way as it does on your phone, with the result that operation is now completely intuitive.

There have also been some huge improvements to the way the app operates. One of the best is it now offers a 'universal' or 'global' search so that you can type in a track title, or an artist's name, and HEOS will search ALL your music services and connected devices… you don't have to search each one individually, as you previously had to, and you can increase the speed of the universal search engine by applying filters. Another great feature is that you can now re-arrange screen icons, so your most-used music sources are at the top, and you can hide any services you don't use, so there's less potential screen clutter. Yet another improvement is the creation of what HEOS calls a 'persistent playback ribbon' which gives you instant control over whatever music you're playing, no matter where you are in the app.

All the information you'll need to install and use the HEOS app is included in the incredibly well-written and superbly detailed Owner's Manual for the LINK 10n that is able to be downloaded from the Marantz website, but if you require any hand-holding, half a dozen or more tutorials are available on YouTube.

Very importantly (and I must emphasise this, because I think it's really important!) after you've set up the LINK 10n with the HEOS app, you don't have to use your phone to operate your system, you can instead use the LINK 10n's front panel controls and/or the supplied infra-red remote. They don't enable total control, but the subset that is available will likely be more than enough for day-to-day operation.

PROPRIETARY D-A CONVERSION

Unlike most hi-fi equipment manufacturers, which use proprietary, 'off-the-shelf' circuits (from ESS, Burr-Brown, *et al*) to convert digital signals to analogue, Marantz is one of the very few that accomplishes the digital to analogue conversion process

SOUNDSITES

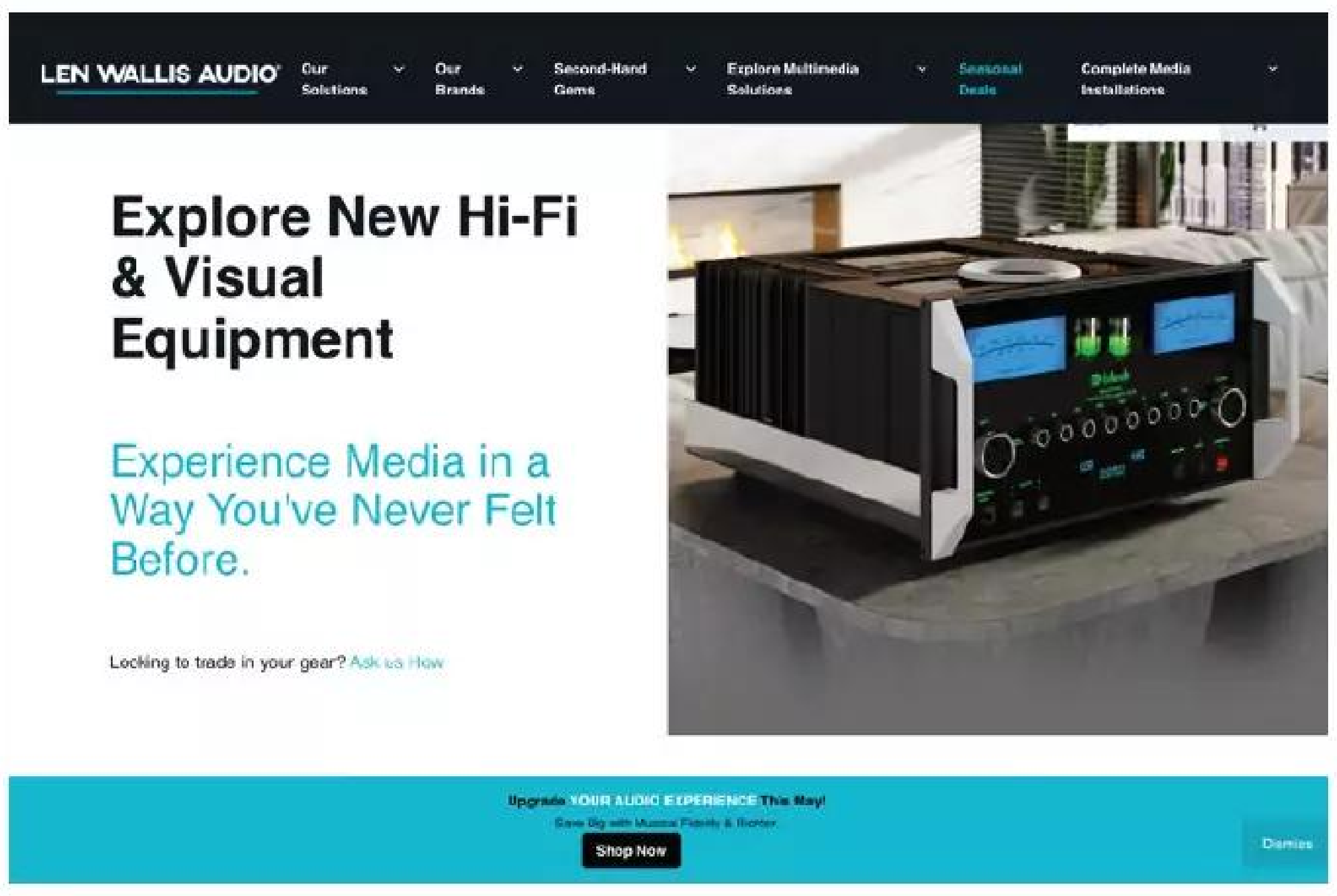
Tivoli Hi-Fi™

SERVICE | SALES | INSTALLATION

155-157 Camberwell Rd
Hawthorn East VIC 3123
1800 848 654

www.tivolihifi.com.au

LEN WALLIS AUDIO®



Explore New Hi-Fi & Visual Equipment

Experience Media in a Way You've Never Felt Before.

Looking to trade in your gear? Ask us How

Upgrade YOUR AUDIO EXPERIENCE This May!

64 Burns Bay Road, Lane Cove, NSW 2066
(02) 9427 6755 | lenwallisaudio.com

www.lenwallisaudio.com.au

Sound Gallery

When you are passionate about music

Immerse yourself in a curated collection of top international audio brands.

ARCAM bel canto estelon GOLDNOTE GigaWatt THE GRYPHON WEISS WILSON AUDIO

P 03 9578 8658 | M 0403 368 755
225-229 Koornang Road, Carnegie VIC 3163
info@soundgallery.com.au

www.soundgallery.com.au

HeyNow Hi-Fi
by Geoff Haynes

2023 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS
VICTORIA'S RETAILER OF THE YEAR 2023

A friendly guide on your journey

Call me for sound advice
(03) 9525-0022 | 0415 668 307

www.heynowhifi.com.au

AUDIO CONNECTION

A World-Class Audio Haven in Sydney

Email: hello@audioconnection.com.au
Phone: 02 9561 0788
Online: Live Chat Support from 8am to 8pm.

www.audioconnection.com.au

Class A Vinyl

HIGH QUALITY VINYL TITLES AND RECORD ACCESSORIES

ONLINE AND IN-STORE, EFTPOS AVAILABLE

Tel 03 8555 0735
8/585 Blackburn Road, Notting Hill, VIC 3168

A DIVISION OF CLASS A AUDIO

www.classaaudio.com.au

SYDNEY AUDIO CLUB

Founded in 2007 the Sydney Audio Club's aim is to provide an opportunity for music lovers to come together and share in diverse musical interests and join the pursuit of high quality sound reproduction.

We are a very friendly club so you don't need to know anyone to join us for an afternoon of fine music and sound.

E enquiries@sydneyaudioclub.org.au

www.sydneyaudioclub.org

Audiophile Reference Recordings

VISIT OUR STORE!
29 Worell Street
Nunawading VIC 3131
✆ 0411 261 822
OR VISIT US ONLINE AT:

www.audiophilereferencerecordings.com.au

Your hifi fix

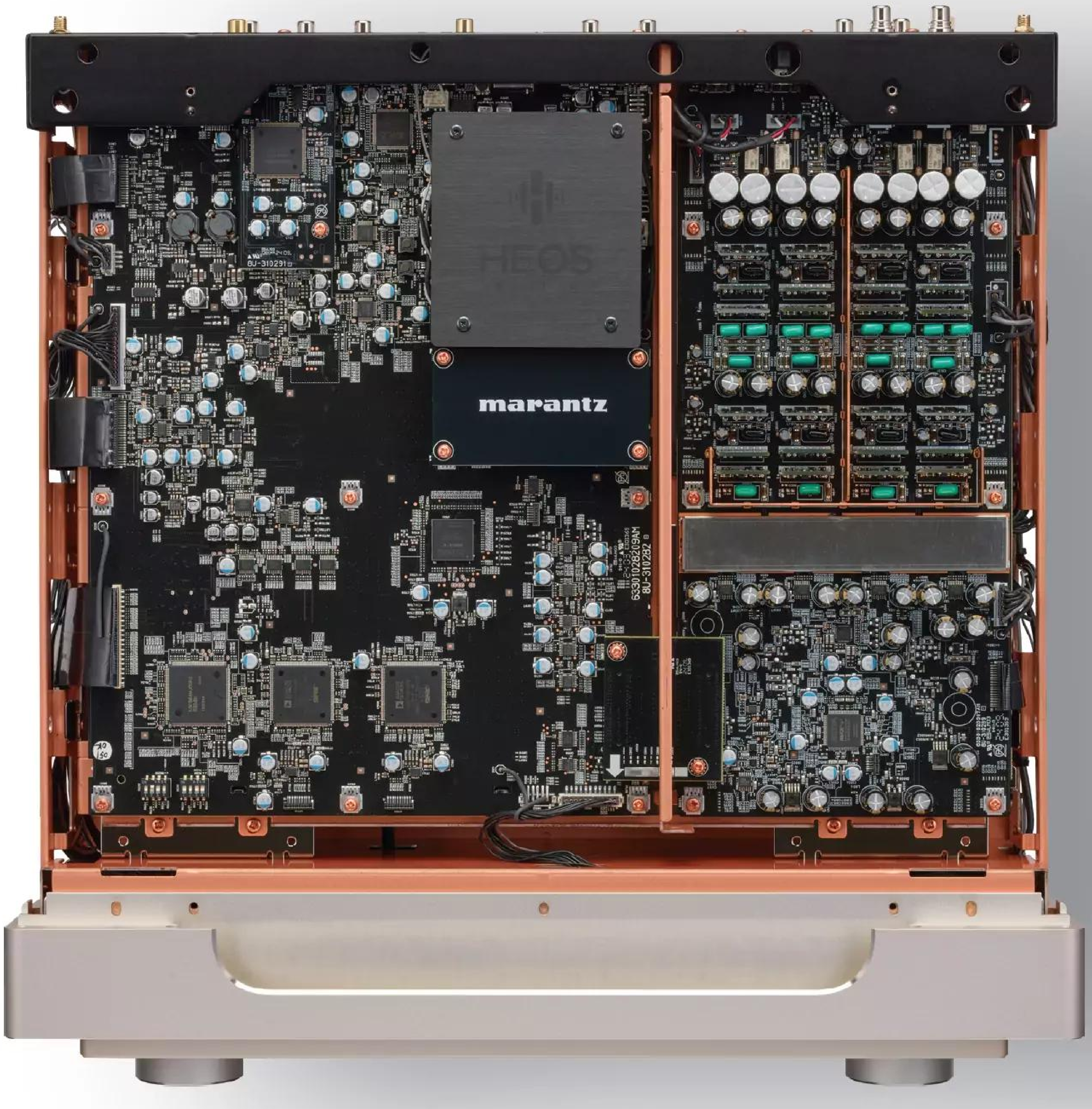
KRISPY AUDIO

Since 2006

Vermöuth VPI made in usa MANLEY LABORATORIES, INC. WBT wbt.de SOULUTION RESEARCH ESOTERIC LUMIN

Call 0411 968 902 - Sydney

www.krispyaudio.com.au



The Marantz LINK 10n supports virtually every digital streaming source you can think of, alongside a healthy selection of physical inputs and outputs.

using a system it developed in-house, called 'Marantz Musical Mastering', often abbreviated to MMM.

It's a very intriguing (some might say convoluted!) conversion process, because it uses a 1-bit sigma-delta modulator and a 32-bit floating-point programmable digital signal processor to convert all incoming pulse code modulated (PCM) digital signals to bitstream digital signals (DSD256) after which the DSD signals are converted to analogue audio signals, a process that eliminates the need for a conventional DAC. Marantz's Rainer Fink (Senior Acoustics Engineer Europe), told reviewer David Price that Marantz developed Marantz Music Mastering: "because we found some weak spots in the signal processing chain, similar to what we figured out with digital filters in the late nineties, so we improved the oversampling algorithm and developed our own noise-shaper – which is the trick part of the algorithm where PCM gets a bitstream. The outcome is DSD256, where 44.1kHz is converted to 11.2MHz and 48kHz to 12.288MHz. Because we want to avoid any sample rate conversion, we decided to work with two master clocks – one for 44.1kHz and its multiples, and another for 48kHz and its multiples. All digital audio fed into the DAC gets the same number-crunching treatment – irrespective of source and ranging from 44.1kHz to 384kHz."

The MMM process allows users to adjust the sound quality of the music being processed by selecting between two different types of digital filter, two different dithering processes (or choose to not add dither at all) and five different noise shaping filters, all with the aim, says Marantz, of achieving "a more direct and transparent digital-to-analog conversion process, aiming to preserve more of the original musical detail and nuance."

Of the two filter options (unimaginatively named Filter 1 and Filter 2), Filter 1 is the default option and has a short (and symmetrical) impulse response for both pre-echo and post-echo, which Marantz says enables the largest amount of audio information, deep stereo imaging and makes it easiest to determine the relative position of the sound source. The impulse response of Filter 2, on the other hand, is asymmetrical, with the post-echo being longer than the pre-echo. This type of impulse response is widely held by audiophiles to result in a more 'analogue' sound quality, and is the one used by the majority of high-end DAC manufacturers that design their own DACs.

Of the two dither options (yes, equally unimaginatively named Dither 1 and Dither 2!) the second is the 'standard' dithering signal found in most digital audio processes which reduces digital artefacts but at the expense of slightly increased noise. The first option (Dither 1) applies a special dither signal developed by Marantz which it says also reduces digital artefacts but largely avoids increasing noises. You also have the option of not adding dither at all (Dither Off) which gives the maximum possible signal-to-noise ratio, but allows for the possibility that artefacts caused by the D-A process could affect sound quality. As for why dither is used at all, it's because at extremely low digital signal levels, it's so difficult to quickly determine a volume level against the background noise that the converter can make errors (called quantization errors) that result in quantization 'noise'. Adding dither (essentially random noise) reduces the chance of quantisation errors becoming audible. (Note that dither isn't an applicable process when playing DSD sources.)

Another way to reduce the effect of quantization noise is to move the noise to a different part of the audio spectrum, where it is less audible to the human ear. This process is called 'noise shaping' and, at its extreme, is sometimes used to move noise out of the audio band completely. In this application, however, the noise is simply 'shaped' in such a way as to make it less noticeable, though this will depend, to a certain extent, on the type of music you're playing at the time. Noise shaping exploits the fact that human hearing is not equally sensitive across all frequencies. By shifting noise energy towards a less sensitive part of human hearing, noise shaping can make the overall signal sound cleaner, without actually changing the amount of noise in the signal.

The Marantz LINK 10n offers a choice between four different noise 'shapes': Balanced, Natural, Dynamic Voice and Dynamic Music.

Balanced, which is the default noise shape, is the one that enables the highest signal-to-noise ratio over the widest frequency range and is the one, says Marantz, that offers "the most open and detailed sound stage." The company claims that 'Natural' "gives high signal-to-noise ratio for natural instruments but may reduce some resolution"; and that 'Dynamic Music' "improves the signal-to-noise ratio but at the cost of a potential

ELEGANT DESIGN
MEETS EXCEPTIONAL SOUND

The E.A.T. F-Dur combines high-end performance with a more accessible price. It keeps the timeless style and rich sound quality E.A.T. is known for. At its core is the 12 EAT F-Note tonearm, crafted to bring out the full depth and detail of your music. A solid CNC-machined aluminum platter, powered by two ultra-quiet AC motors, ensures smooth, stable playback every time.

'...the F-Dur matches its premium engineering with a heartfelt performance that brings you closer to your favourite tracks on your treasured vinyl.'
EISA Awards 2025

EAT
European Audio Team

audio active AUSTRALIA Distributed by Audio Active Australia **www.audioactive.com.au** Phone: (03) 9699 8900 Find a Dealer ▶

loss of resolution in sound stage." Marantz says you can expect "the highest possible dynamics for wideband music content in this setting." The 'Dynamic Voice' setting moves the noise away from the section of the audio spectrum used by the human voice, in order to, says Marantz, "give the highest possible dynamics for natural instruments and voices."

IN USE AND OPERATION

It was only when I was installing the LINK 10n into my system, by replacing my own preamp with the LINK 10n, that I realised there appears to be a 'missing link' in Marantz's current catalogue, because there is no matching 'Reference' power amplifier, only the Model 10 Reference Integrated Amplifier, and the fact that the Model 10 is integrated means it's providing many features and functions you don't really need, because they're already built into the LINK 10n.

Marantz has anticipated that many owners of the LINK 10n will purchase the Model 10 to use as a power amplifier, so the Model 10 has a special operational mode that disables the power supply to the preamplifier section of the Model 10, which has the effect of increasing the amount of power available to the power amplifier section, and also eliminating the possibility of noise from the preamplifier section being introduced into the power amplifier section.

Marantz does of course have power amplifiers in its range (the Model M1 and Model M4), but they're not in the same league as the Model 10, so if you want an amplifier that's a perfect sonic and visual match for the LINK 10n, you'll have to accept some redundancy.

Getting the LINK 10n up and running was totally straight-forward — I can't remember the last time I didn't have a single hiccup with an install. The only downside was the necessity of creating a HEOS account in order to proceed with the install, something I always find mildly annoying, but at least I didn't have to hand over any personal information, only my email address (which had to be confirmed). To be strictly accurate, you don't actually have to create a HEOS account, you can use the LINK 10n without it, but it kind of defeats the point of buying the LINK 10n in the first place!

If you did use the LINK 10n without HEOS, you'd find that the left-most front panel control will let you select between the inputs HEOS, Bluetooth, USB-DAC, HDMI, Digital coaxial, Digital optical 1, Digital optical 2, Phono, Balanced Line-In, Unbalanced Line-In, and Set-Up. This last setting lets you arrange how volume level is displayed (0–100 or –99.5 to 0dB), set a maximum output level, change display brightness and switch between the different digital filters, dither types and noise shapes. The volume control to the right has a smooth action (no detents) but is not weighted, so you can't 'spin' it.

One of the very first albums I played did not have album art embedded, so I was pleased to discover that rather than serve up a blank screen, the LINK 10n instead provided a colourful 'target-like' image in the display. While checking this out, I discovered that Marantz says that your album art 'should not exceed 500×500 pixels' because otherwise 'image size may affect playback'. This shouldn't be an issue, but if you ever run into a problem, just re-size your album artwork. Also, you'll need to install Twonky Media Server or jRiver Media Server if you want to play back from a network.

Sound quality was everything I would expect from a component of this quality, irrespective of the input I was using. And although I was expecting that the performance of the various digital inputs would be outstanding, and this was indeed the case, what I was not expecting was that the LINK 10n's phono stage would be of the same standard — I'd kind of gone in thinking it would be more of an after-thought. How wrong I was! The phono stage on the 10n is seriously good… so good it would put many dedicated stand-alone phono stages to shame.

The fact that the LINK 10n lets adjust filter types, dither types and noise shaping means you're going to be able to create exactly the type of sound you prefer when listening to whatever music you like to play, which kind of means that me commenting on what I heard when playing the music I like to listen to, using my preferred settings, will not be particularly helpful to you in terms of making a decision whether or not to purchase a LINK 10n. So I'm going to bow out this time, and let you make your own purchasing decisions based on what you hear in your own auditioning sessions. However, if it helps give you a starting point when you're doing this, I found that of the two filters I preferred the second, for dither, Dither 1, and for noise shaping, balanced.

CONCLUSION

I really can't think of any streaming preamplifier DAC I'd be prouder to own than the Marantz LINK 10n. I had a smile on my face and a deeply satisfied feeling inside throughout the time I had it in my home, because I loved everything about it — how it looked, how it sounded (including how I could alter the sound quality to best-suit whatever music I was playing), plus I definitely loved the way the updated HEOS app made finding, organising and playing my music easier than it's ever been. Marantz has obviously poured its heart and soul — and its considerable technical expertise — into building the LINK 10n to the very highest standard.

Greg Borrowman

SPECS & CONTACT

Brand: Marantz
Model: LINK 10n
RRP: $19,000
Warranty: Two Years

Distributor: Marantz Australia
Address: 303/754 Pacific Highway
Chatswood NSW, 2067
T: (02) 8542 1111
W: www.marantz.com/en-au/

Laboratory Test Report

Readers interested in a full technical appraisal of the performance of the Marantz LINK 10n Streaming Preamplifier/DAC should continue on and read the **LABORATORY TEST REPORT** published on the following pages. Readers should note that the results mentioned in the report, tabulated in performance charts and/or displayed using graphs and/or photographs should be construed as applying only to the specific sample tested.

Newport Test Labs measured the maximum output voltage of the analog outputs of Marantz LINK 10n as 10 volts RMS (unbalanced) and 20 volts RMS (balanced), which is far in excess of what you will ever need in order to drive any downstream component.

Newport Test Labs reported the frequency response of the LINK 10n has extending from below than 1Hz to more than 550kHz (–1dB), and out to 830kHz –3dB (analogue) so the design has a far wider bandwidth than claimed by Marantz. Across the audio band, the response was as flat as the proverbial ruler, as is shown in Graph 1, which shows the response from 5Hz to 40kHz. You can see the response is just 0.25dB down at 5Hz.

This extended and linear frequency response is reflected in the three oscillograms showing reproduction of 100Hz, 1kHz and 10kHz square waves.

Channel separation is also exceptionally good, at 127dB at 1kHz, and 117dB at the extremes of the audio band. Channel balance was an excellent 0.019dB and interchannel phase was in the same ballpark, with no recorded error at 20Hz, a mere 0.05 degrees at 1kHz and just 1.01 degree at 20kHz.

Distortion of the analogue section is shown in Graph 2, and you can see there's a second harmonic at –108dB (0.00035%), a third at –112dB (0.00025%) and a fourth at –115dB (0.00017%). The other distortion components are more than 120dB down (0.0001%). Overall wideband THD+N was measured at 0.001%.

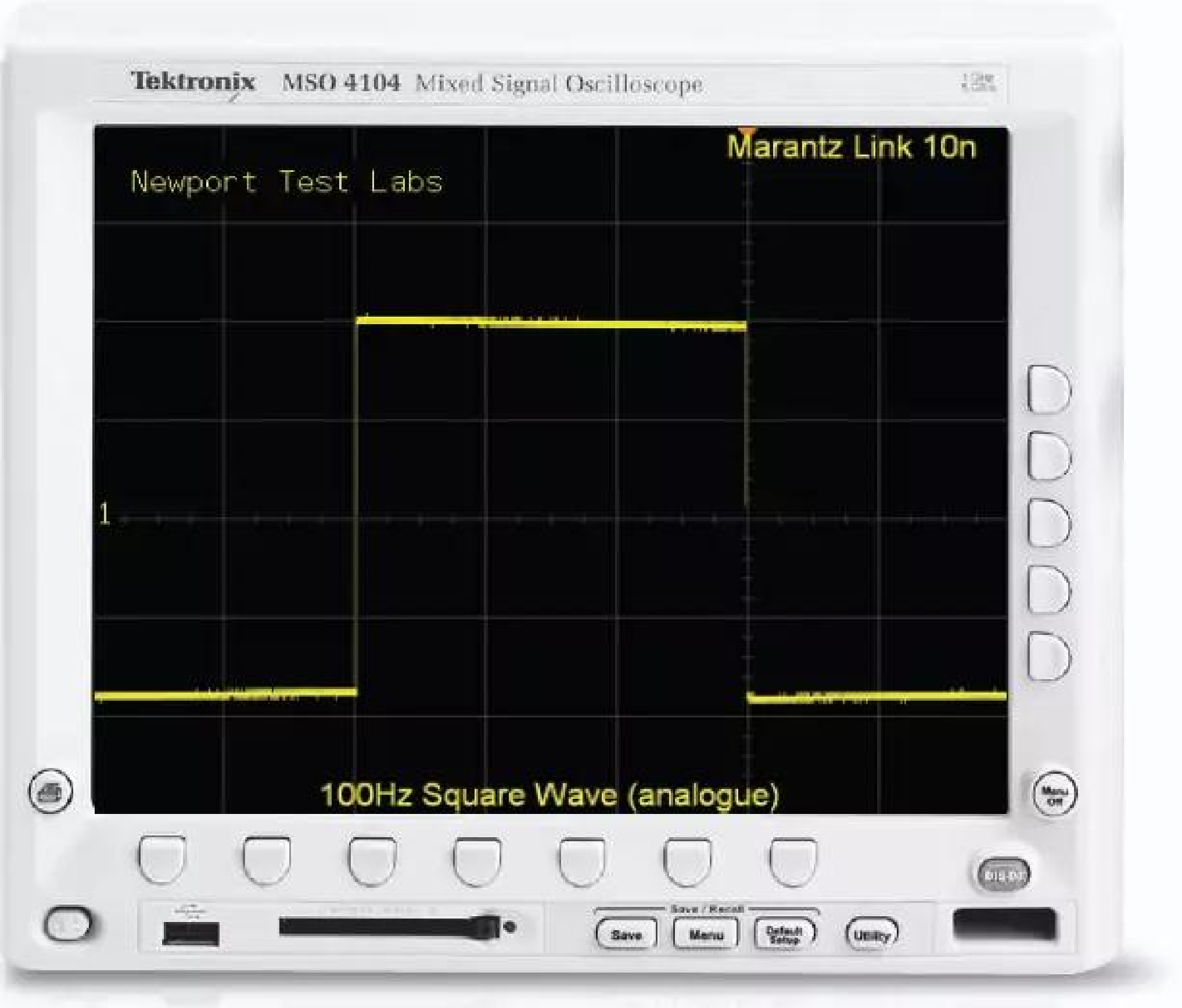
CCIF intermodulation distortion is shown in Graph 3 and you can see there are only two sidebands either side of the two test signals at 19kHz and 20kHz and both are more than 110dB down (0.00031%). This is exceptionally good performance.

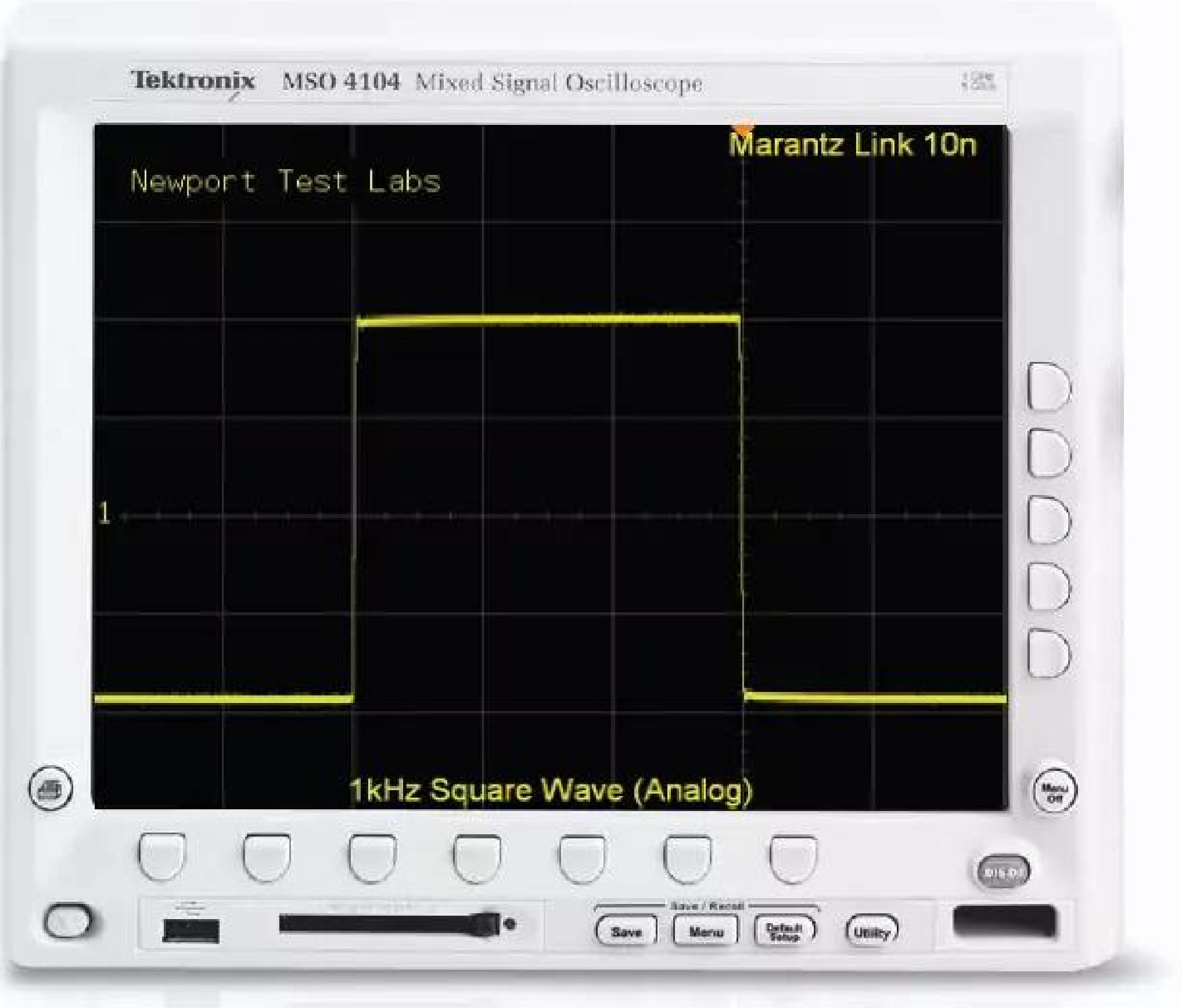
The frequency response of the digital section of the LINK 10n is shown in Graph 4, for a 16-bit/44.1kHz (Red Book) digital source, showing the response when using Filter 1 (black trace) and Filter 2 (red trace). Although the high-frequency roll-off with Filter one above 4kHz looks to be dramatic, this is because of the expanded vertical scale of the graph. In fact it's just 0.4dB down at 10kHz and 2.8dB down at 20kHz. As you can see, the Filter 2 response extends ruler flat out to almost 20kHz, with the roll-off shown being inherent in the limitation of the digital test signal — as you'll see later, response with a 24-bit/48kHz test signal is more extended, and if you play music recorded at higher sampling rates, the high-frequency response will be extended commensurately.

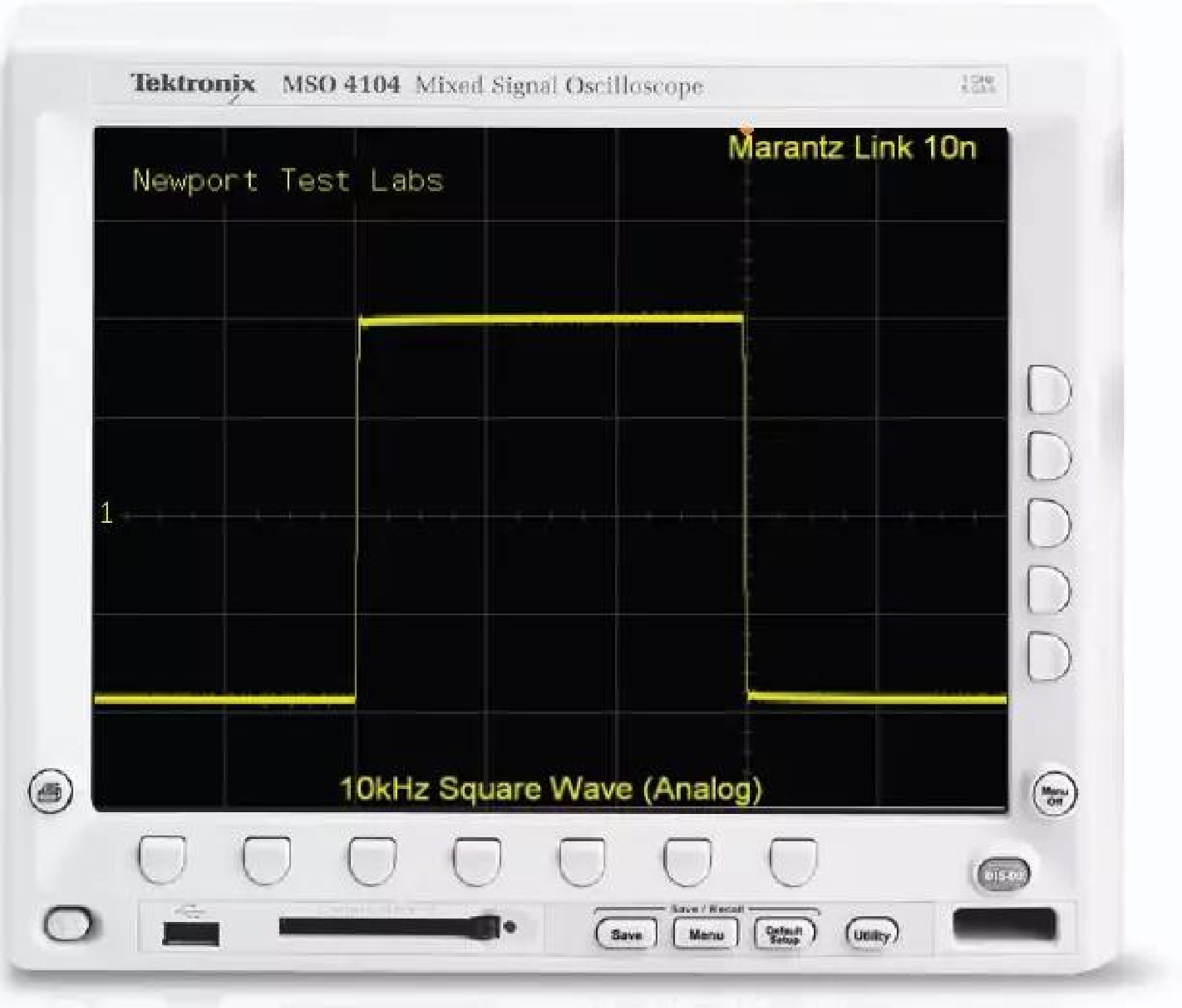
Distortion at 0dB with Red Book standard 1kHz coding is shown in Graph 5 and is superbly low, with just a second

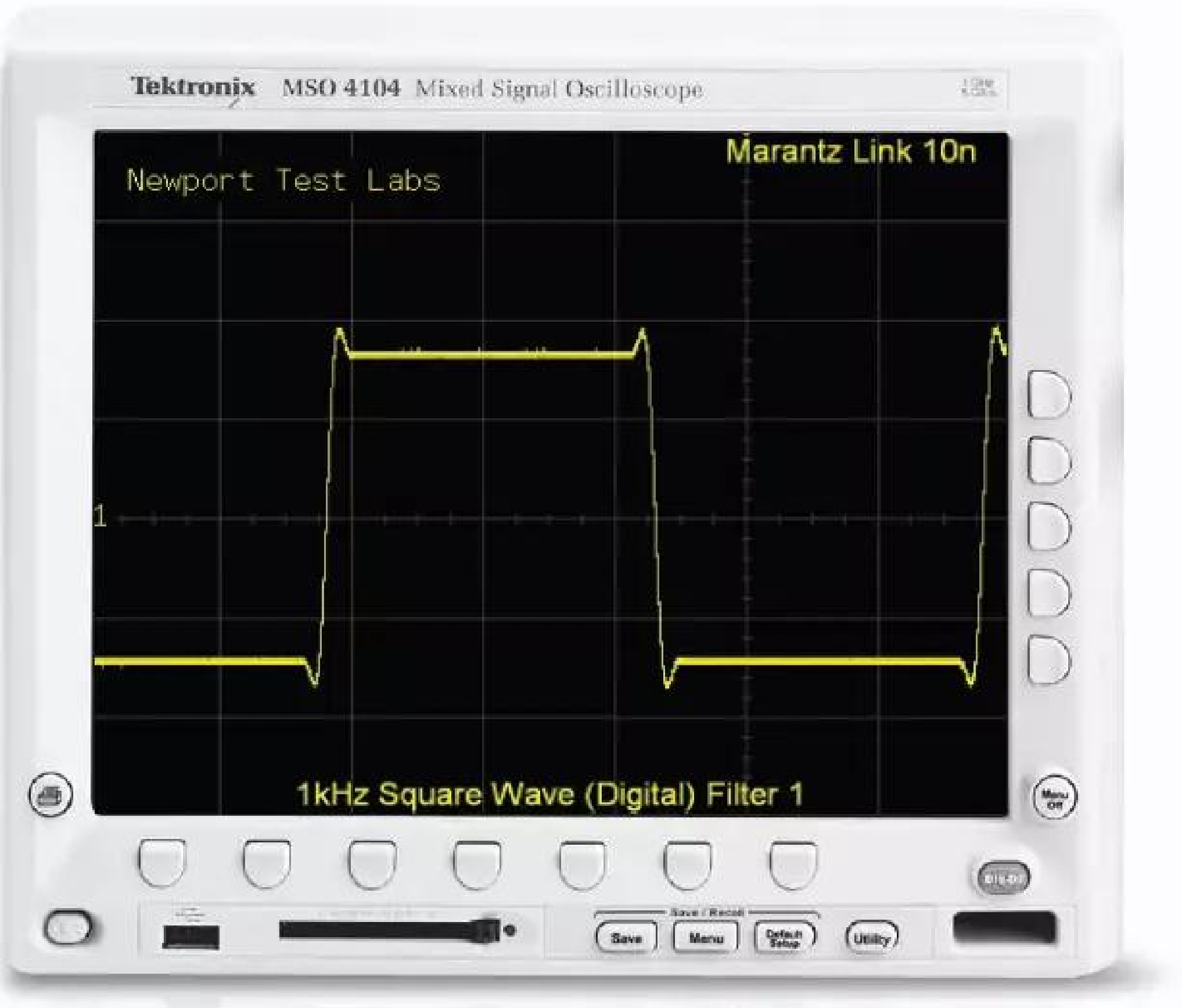
Marantz Model 10n Streaming Preamplifier – Laboratory Test Results (Analog)

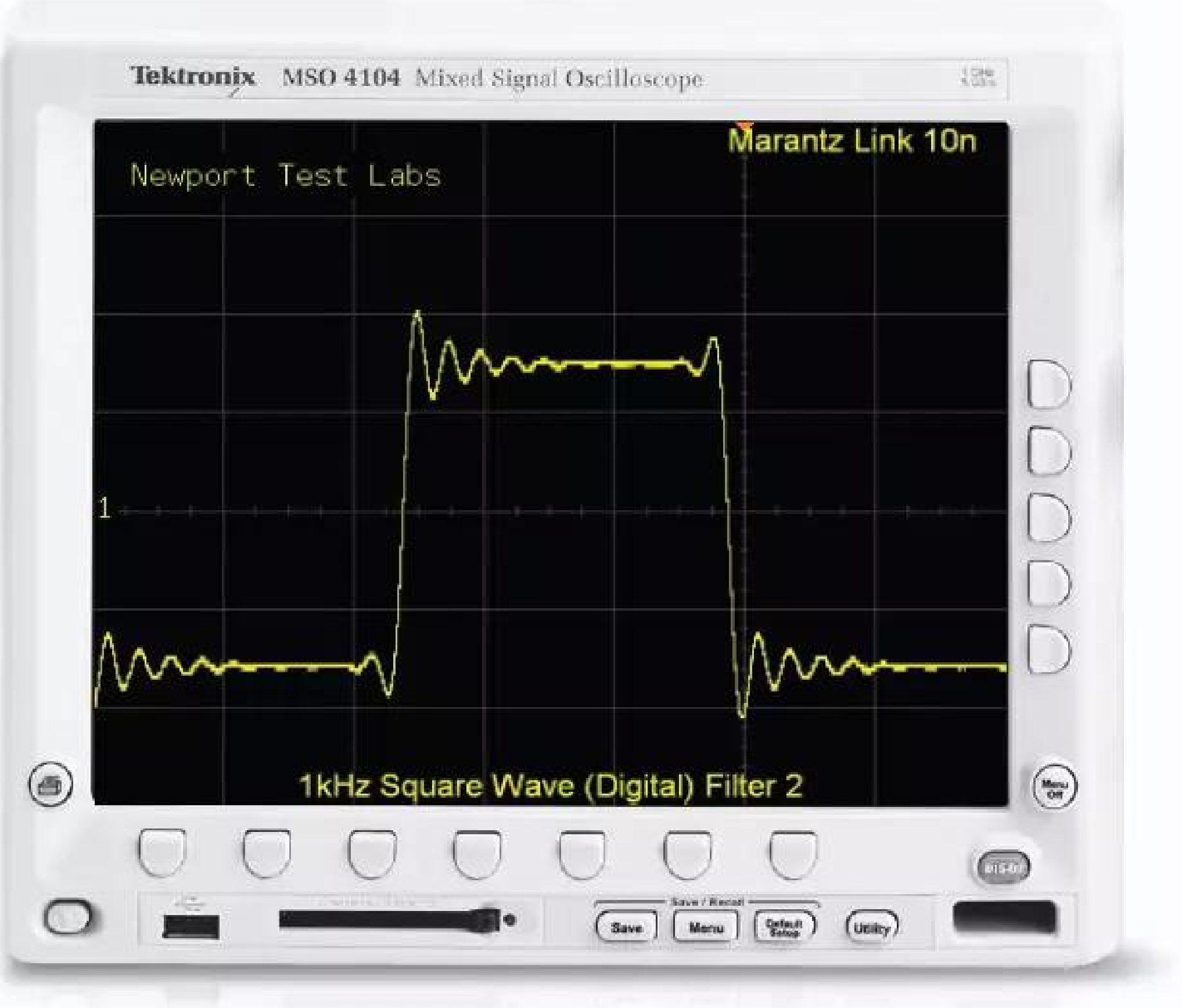
Test	Measured Result	Units/Comment
Frequency Response @ 1 volt o/p	<1Hz – 550kHz	–1dB
Frequency Response @ 1 volt o/p	<1Hz – 830kHz	–3dB
Channel Separation (dB)	117dB / 127dB / 117dB	(20Hz / 1kHz / 20kHz)
Channel Balance	0.019	dB @ 1kHz
Interchannel Phase (Direct)	0.00 / 0.05 / 1.01	degrees (20Hz / 1kHz / 20kHz)
THD+N	0.001%	@ 1-volt output
Signal-to-Noise (unwghted/wghted)	98dB /100dB	dB referred to 1-volt output
Power Consumption	0.18 / 59.82	watts (Standby / On)
Power Factor	+0.723	watts at 1-watt / at rated output
Mains Voltage Variation during Test	239 – 245	Minimum – Maximum

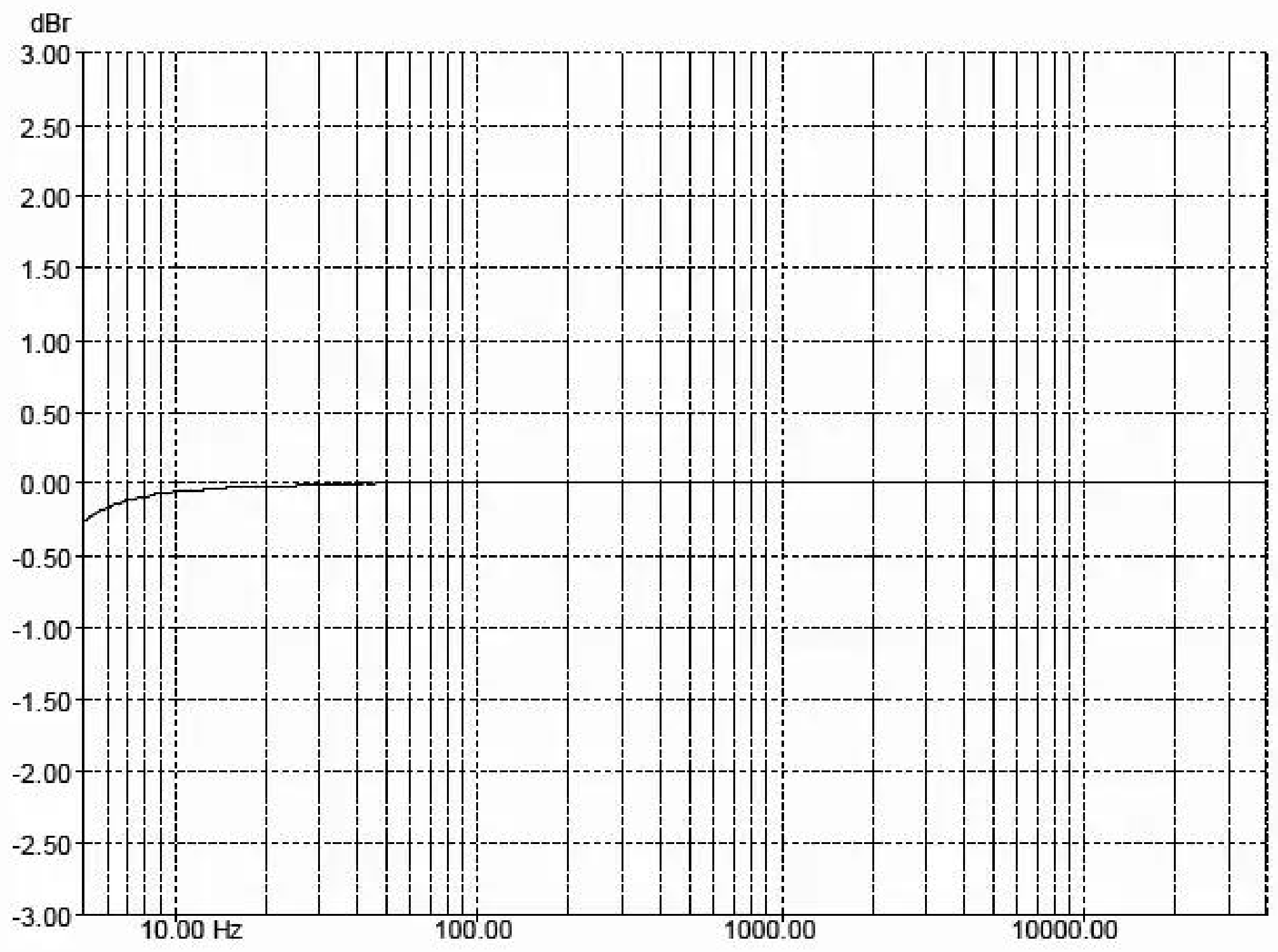




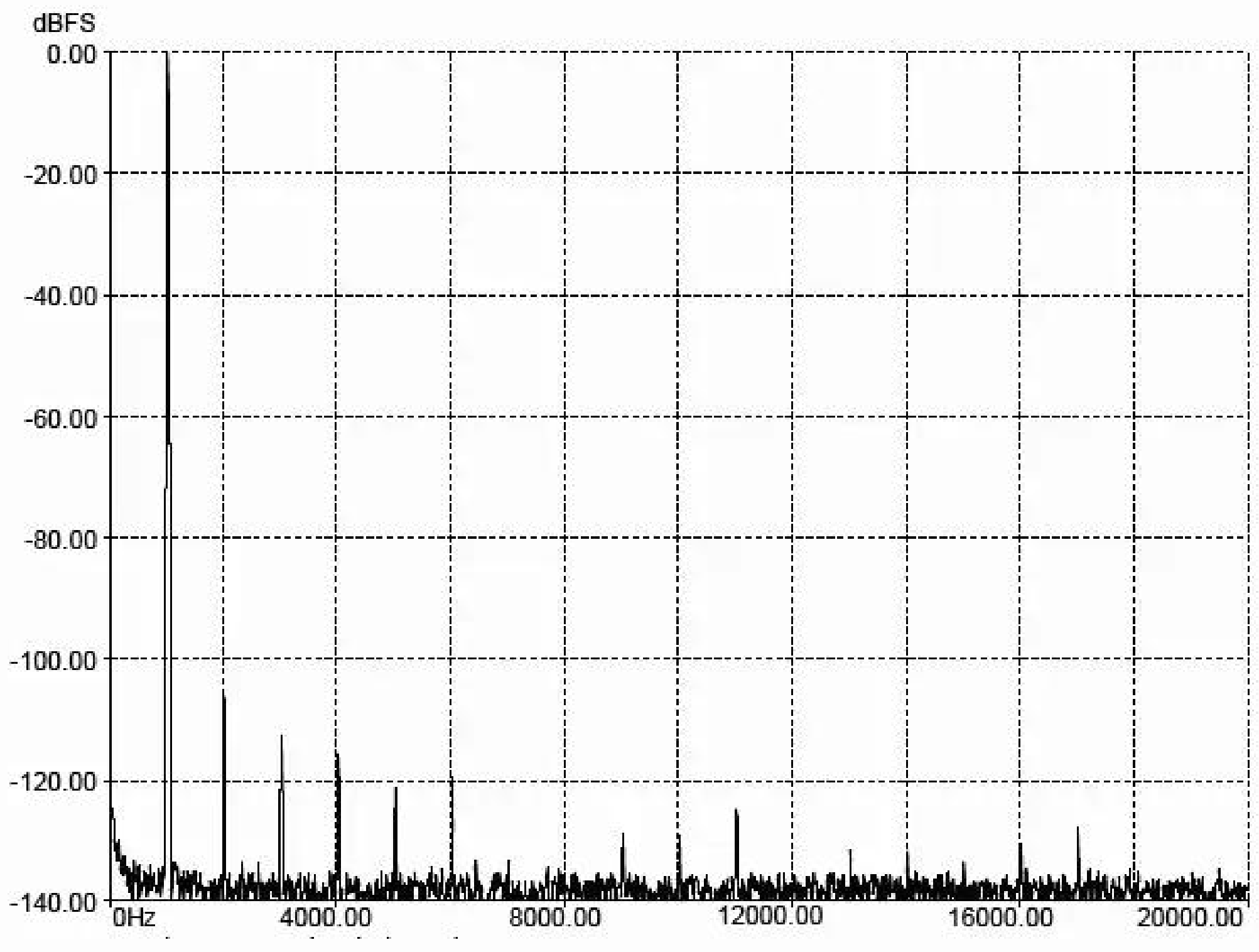




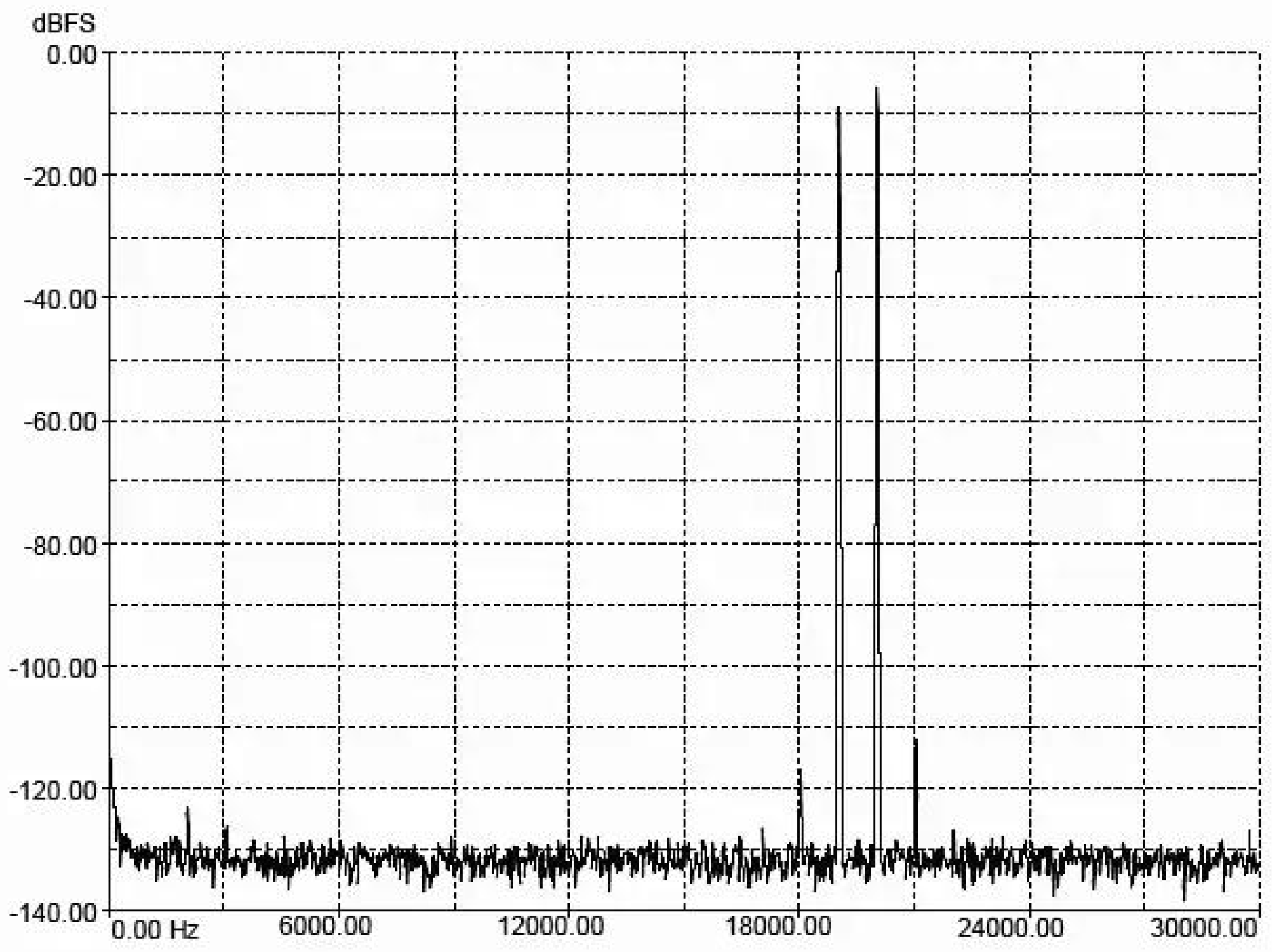




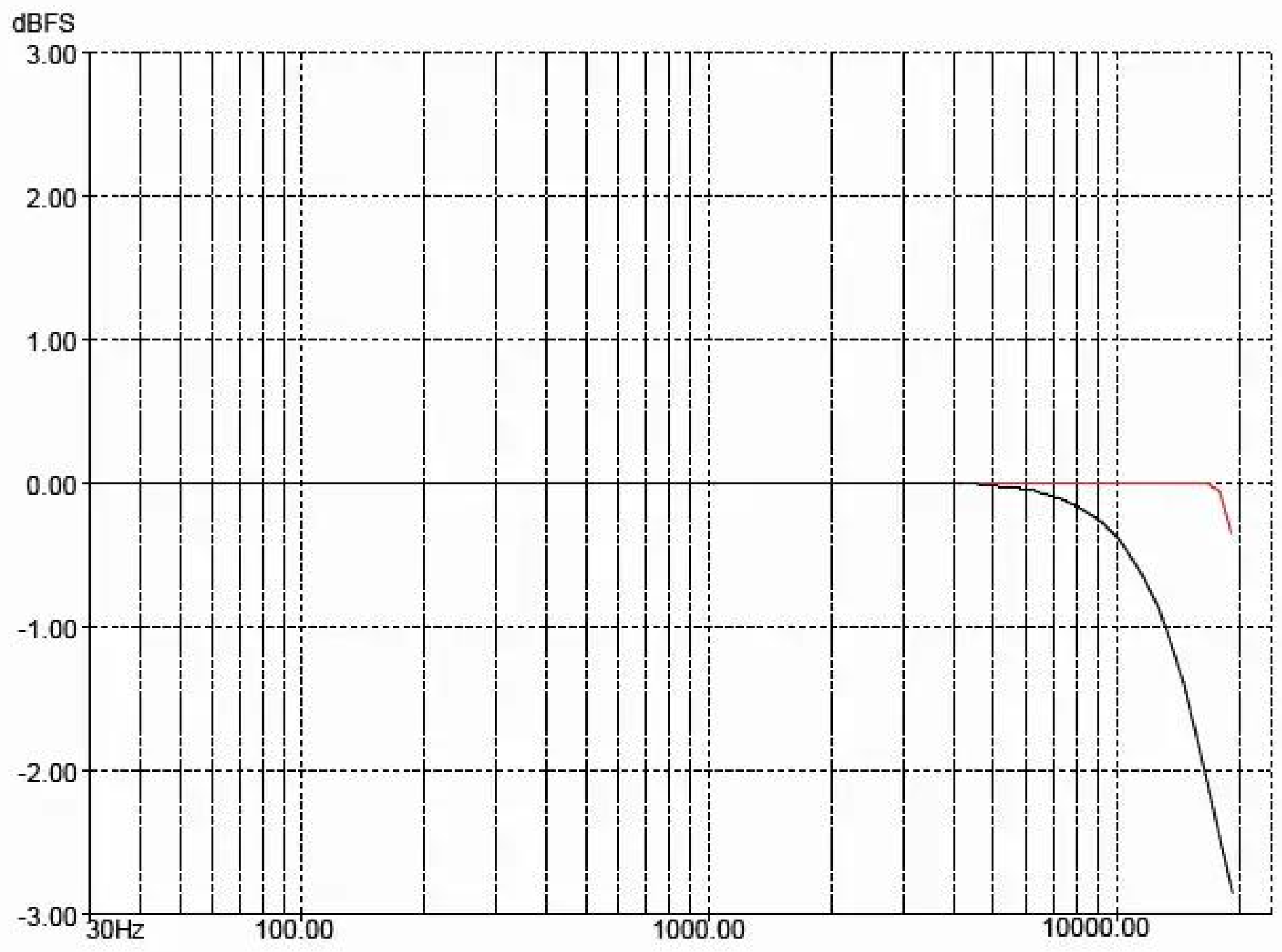
Graph 1. Frequency response, analogue input



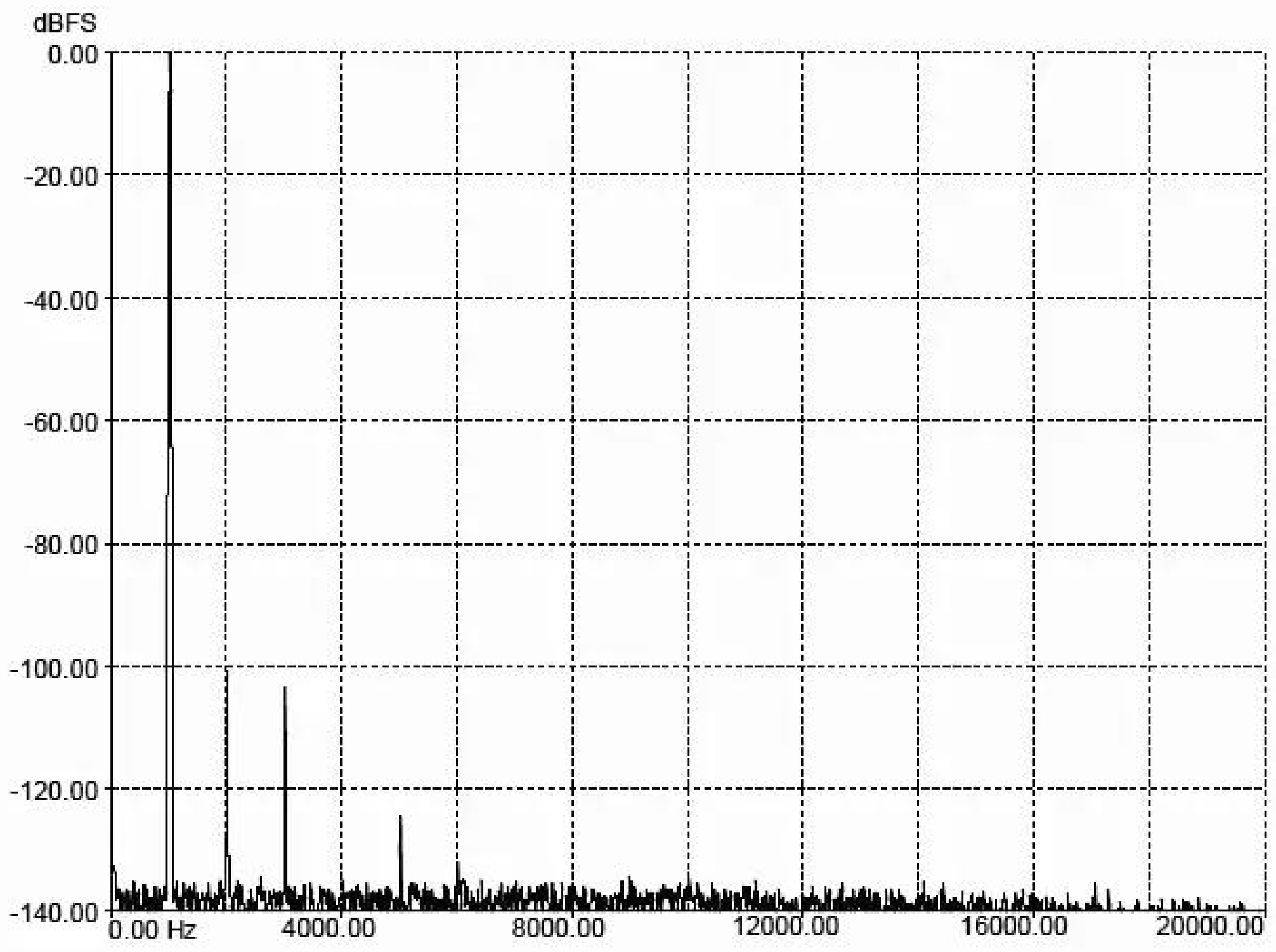
Graph 2. THD at 1kHz balanced input



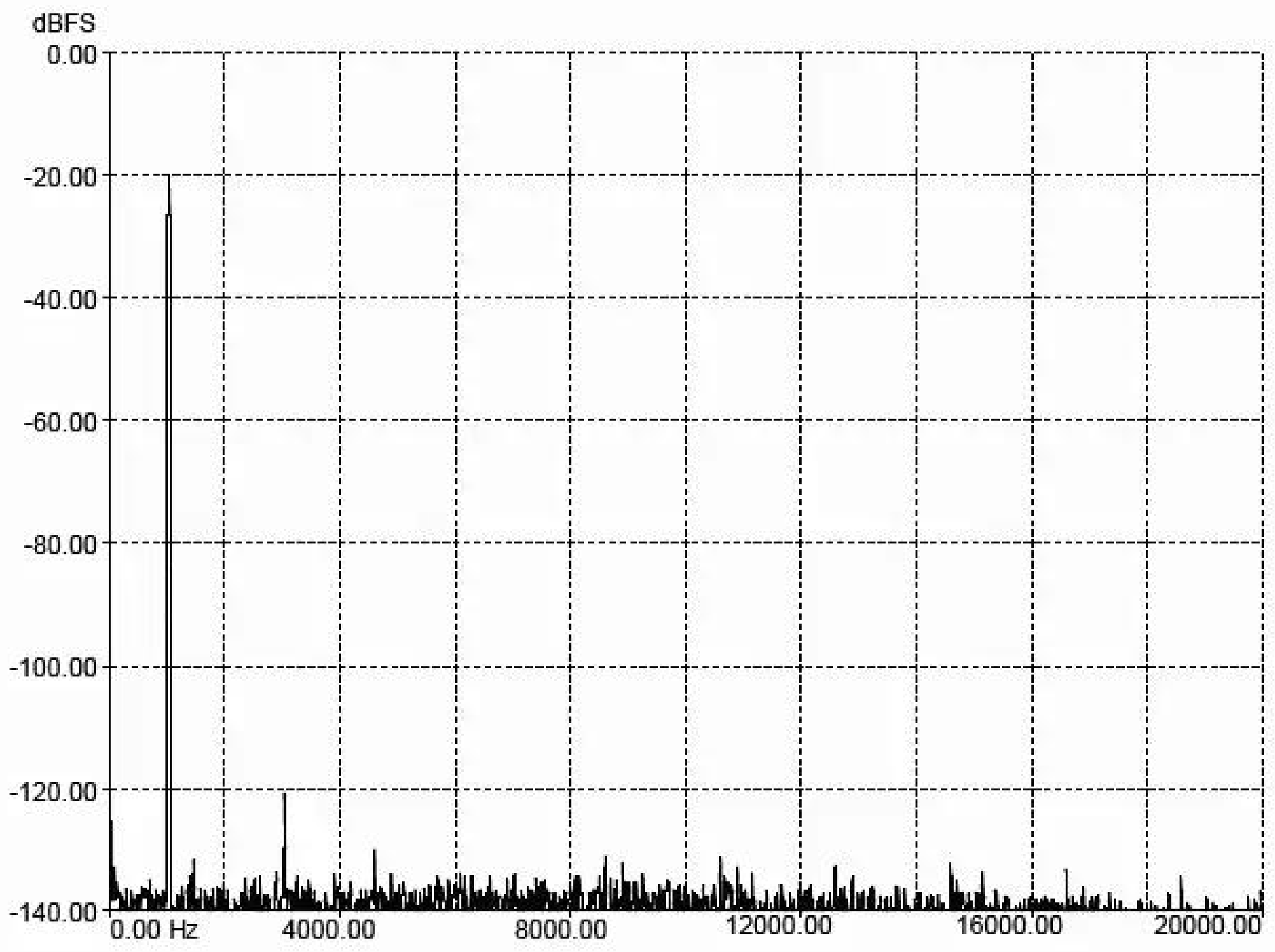
Graph 3. IMD (CCIF) balanced input



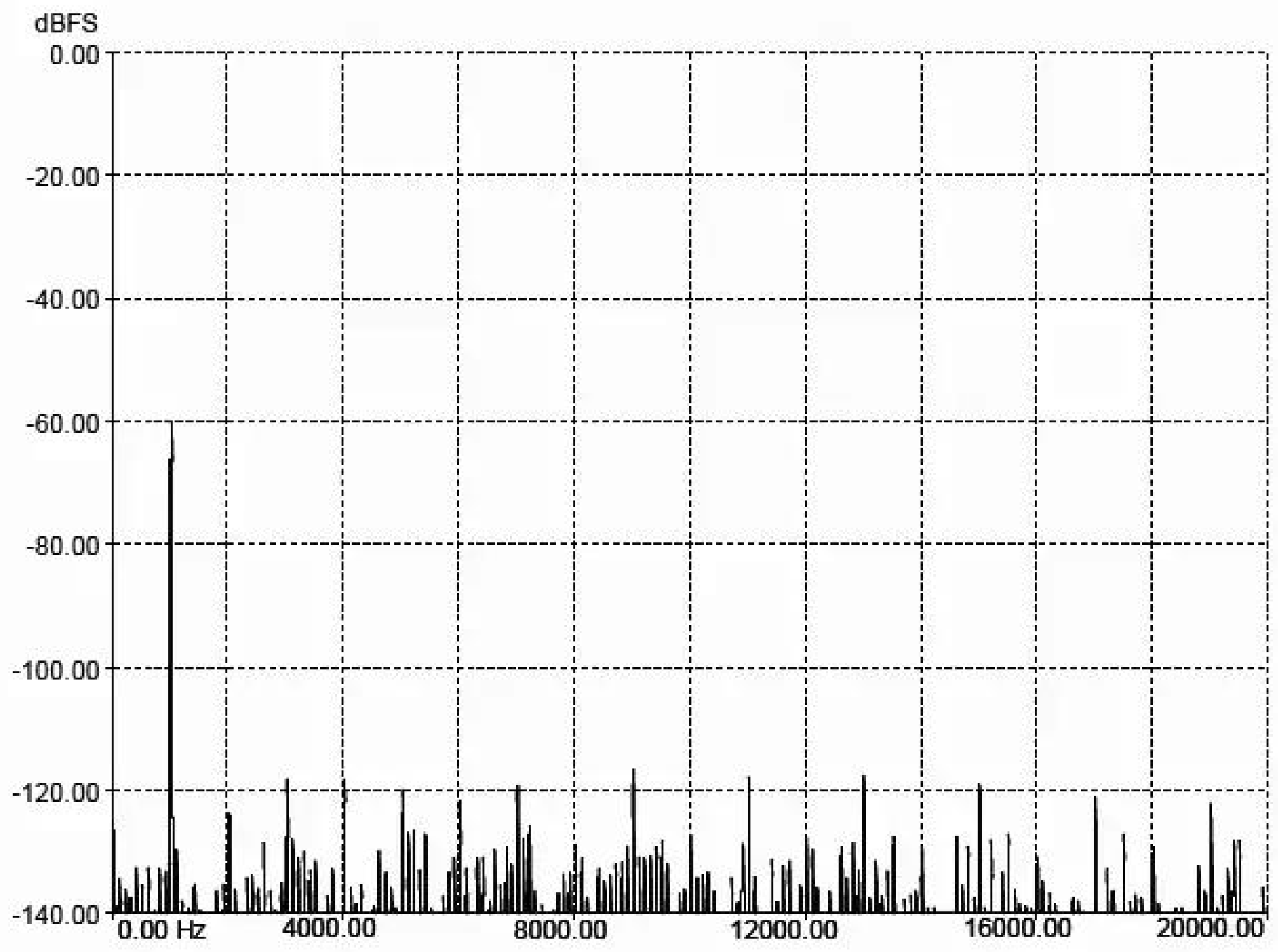
Graph 4. Frequency response (44.1kHz/16-bit digital) Filter 1 (black) vs Filter 2 (red)



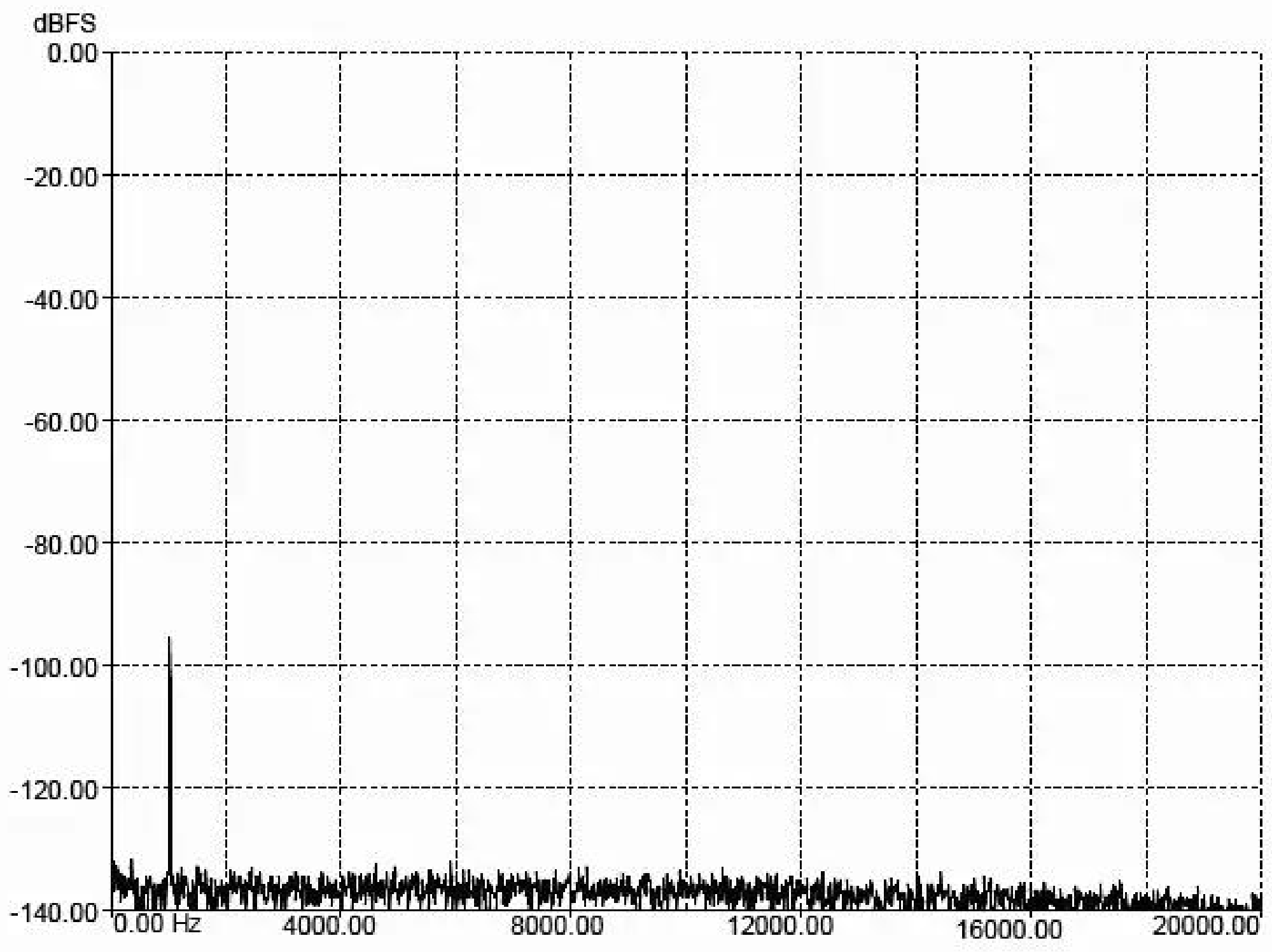
Graph 5. THD at 1kHz at 0dB (16-bit/44kHz)



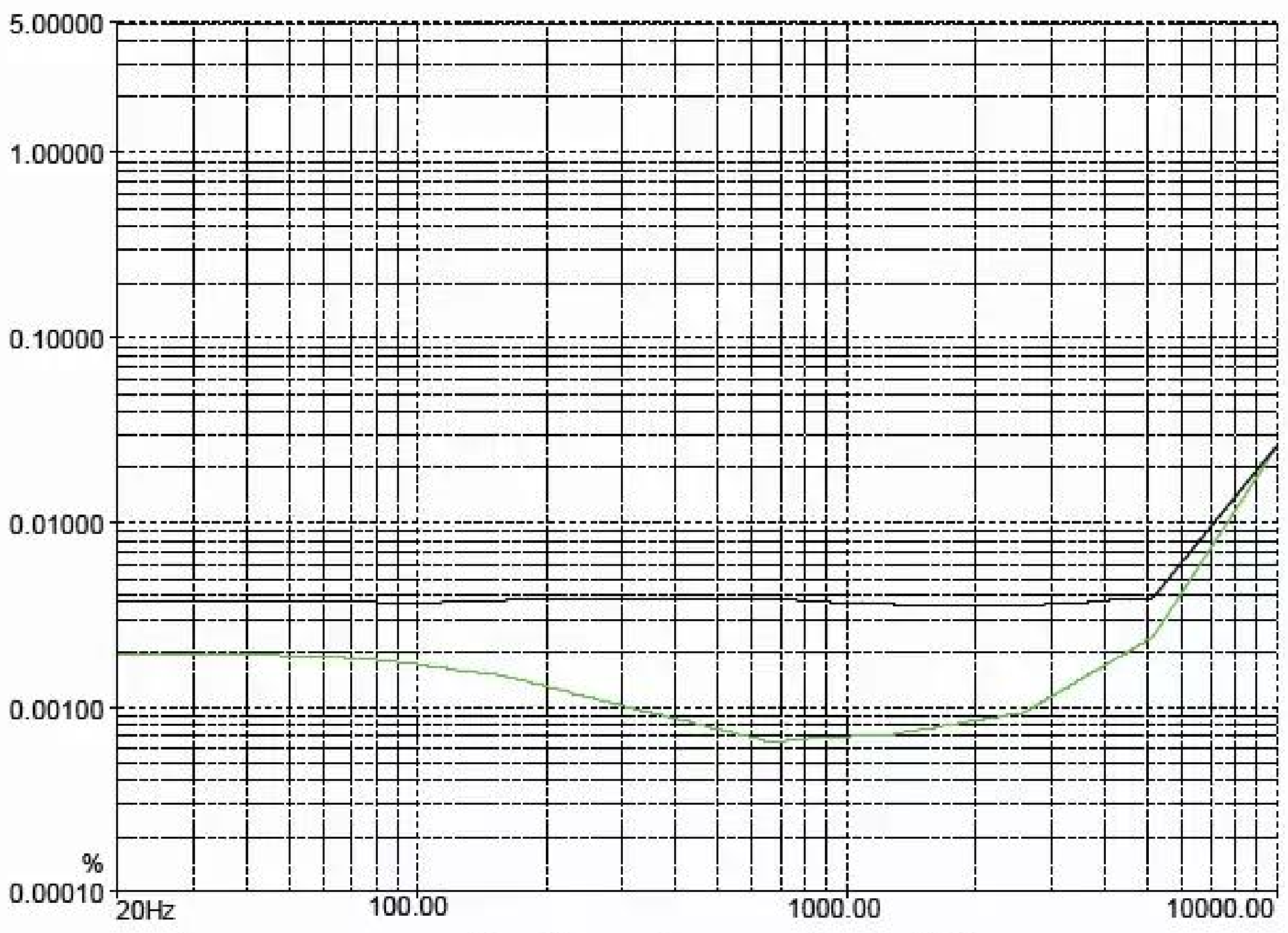
Graph 6. THD at 1kHz, -20dB (16-bit/44kHz)



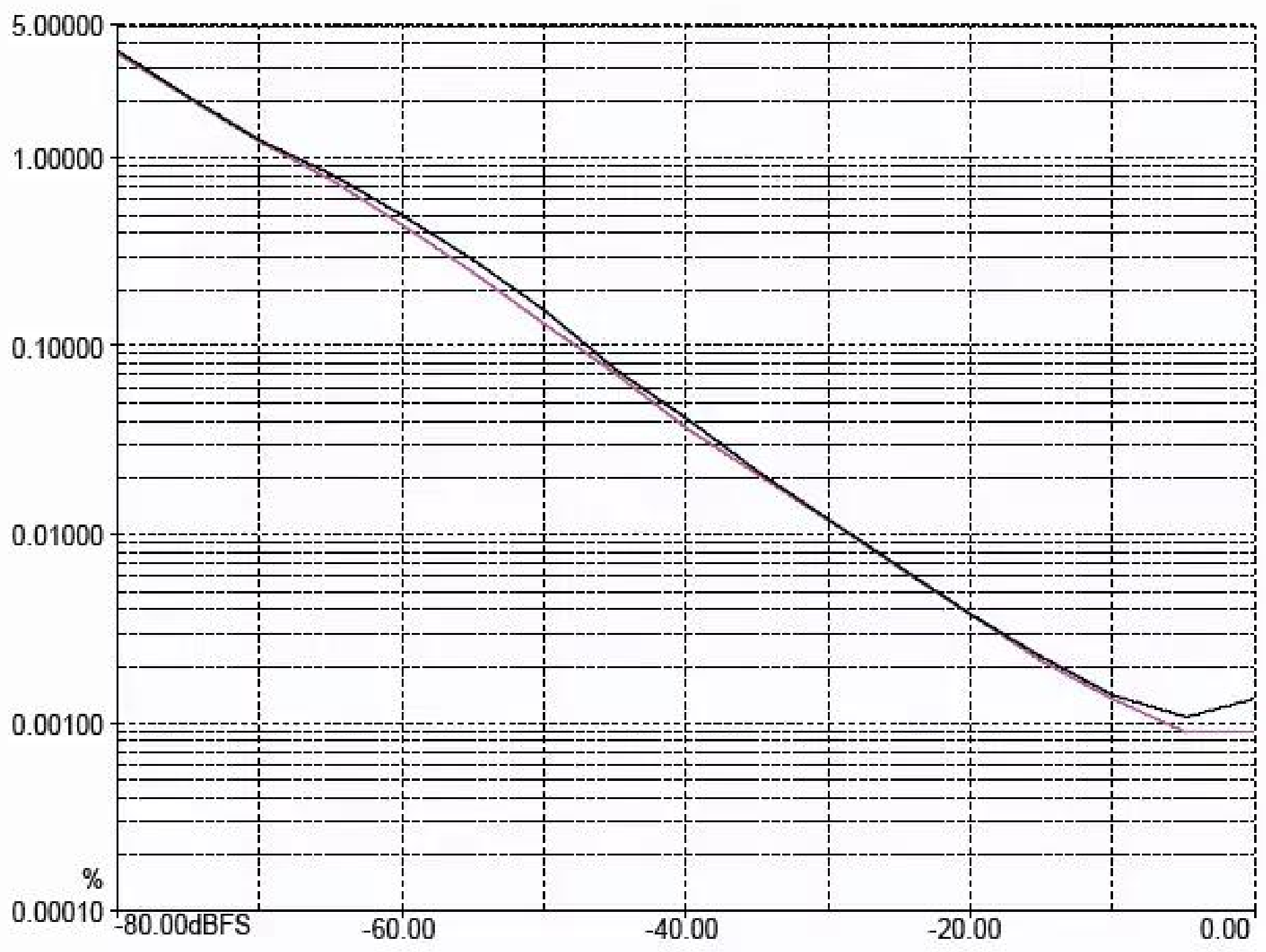
Graph 7. THD at 1kHz, -60dB (no dither)



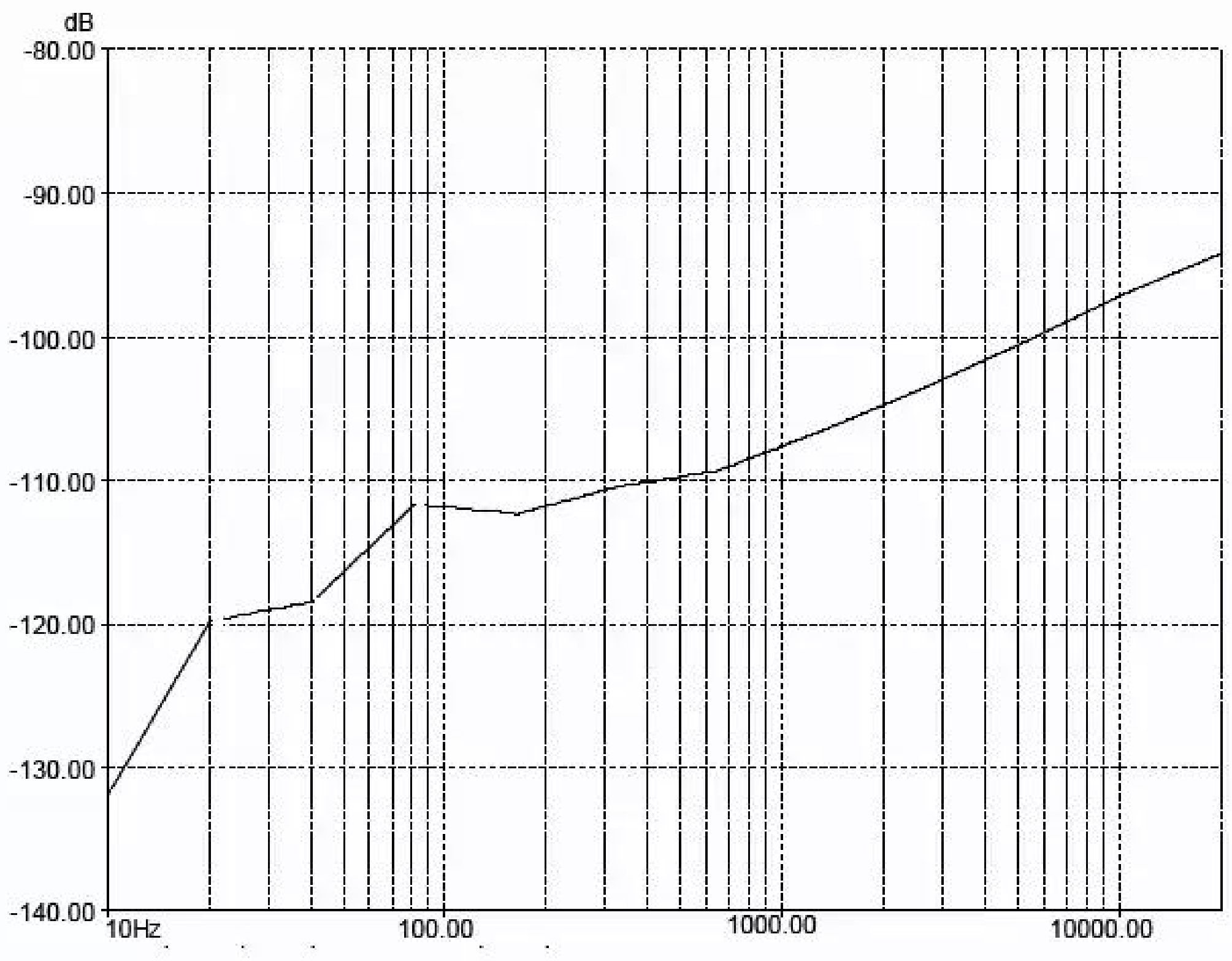
Graph 8. THD at 1kHz, -90dB (16-bit/44.1kHz dithered)



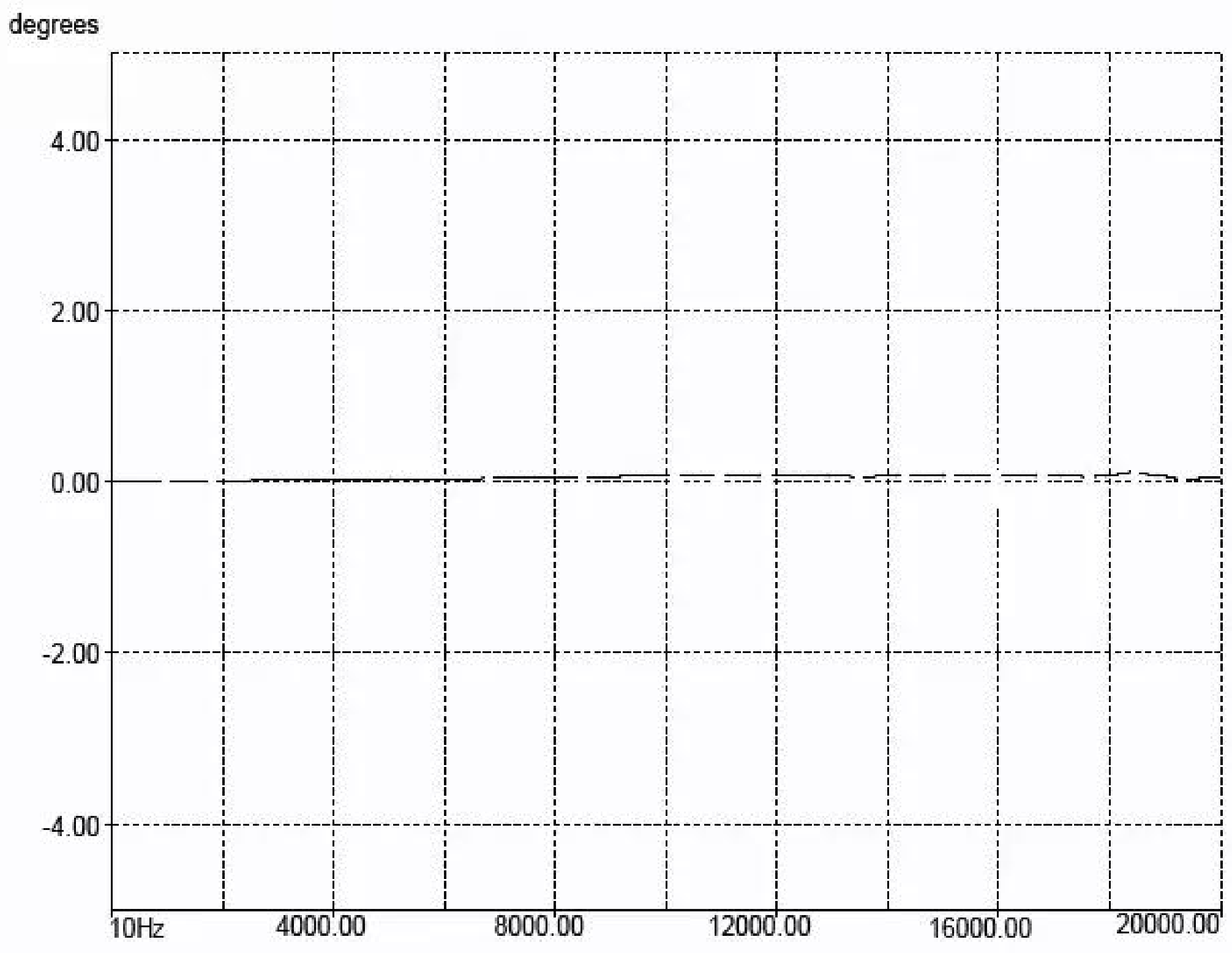
Graph 9. THD vs Frequency (24-bit/48kHz) at -1dB (green) and -20dB (black).



Graph 10. THD vs Level (24-bit/48kHz) left channel (purple) and right channel (black)



Graph 11. Channel separation 24-bit/48kHz



Graph 12. Interchannel phase response 24-bit/48kHz

harmonic at –100dB (0.001%), a third at –104dB (0.00063%) and a fifth at –125dB (0.00005%). At –20dB (Graph 6), there's essentially just a third harmonic at –120dB (0.0001%). With the 1kHz test signal at –60dB you can see the inevitable interpolation errors resulting from the test signal not being dithered, but everything is more than 120dB down, which is an excellent result. Dropping the level of the test signal down to –90dB and dithering it resulted in the LINK 10n returning the superb result shown in Graph 8, where only the test signal is visible on the graph, and the noise floor is sitting down at –140dB.

Graph 9 graphs THD vs. Frequency when using a 24-bit/48kHz test signal for both –1dB (green trace) and –20dB (black trace) levels and you can see the distortion levels are both exceptionally low, and uniform with frequency, while Graph 10 shows THD vs. Level for the same digital coding, this time showing the left channel and right channels are almost perfectly in alignment.

Newport Test Labs has included two oscillograms showing the differences in reproduction of a 1kHz square when using the two different digital filters. You can see that using Filter 1 returns a superbly clean square wave, but with the time reversal you'd expect to see from a conventional oversampling filter, albeit with less ripple, while Filter 2 still shows time reversal, but with more post-echo than pre-echo.

Standby power consumption is better than required under Australian regulations, with the LINK 10n drawing only 0.18-watts. In normal operation, it will draw less than 100-watts. **Steve Holding**

DCD and PMA also available in Silver

Denon 3000NE Series

The Denon 3000NE Series brings amplifier, CD/SACD player and turntable together in perfect harmony. Combining powerful UHC-MOS amplification, precision engineering and timeless design, it delivers the ultimate expression of Denon performance. Together or individually, Denon 3000NE Series components offer unmatched, class-leading performance and value.

"An astonishing system worthy of one of the oldest brands in hi-fi" *– EISA Awards 2025*

DENON.COM

Contact us for your nearest Denon Dealer: sales.au@soundunited.com
03 8542 1111 | /DenonAustralia

Kaleidescape Strato E

4K movie player

+
- Unrivalled video and sound quality
- Attractive and intuitive interface
- Content from the Movie Store is affordable

−
- Limited onboard storage
- Australian Movie Store not as populated at present

RRP **$5,299**

Kaleidescape is a Californian company that's been at the forefront of digital home movies since 2001. While its brand name is likely known predominantly in the custom-install market for those with the space (and budget) for dedicated home theatres, I was pleasantly surprised by just how well a movie player can fit into a more conventional home system.

You may not have heard of the company before — it hasn't officially had a presence Down Under until this year, although it's previously been possible to import players and servers from the US, even without offical support. Fortunately that's all changed, as Melbourne-based Audio Active has taken on distribution duties, making it much easier — although admittedly still quite pricey — for Aussies to gain access to everything Kaleidescape has to offer. Crucially there's now an official Australian store as well.

This review focuses on the brand's most recent release, the Strato E, which represents the most affordable entry point for 4K content. It slots itself between the Strato M 2K player (also released in 2025) and the flagship Strato V 4K player, released in September 2024. Obviously, movies come first with the Strato E, but the digital store is also stocked with live concerts from a variety of musicians, making it a product that has the potential to make your hi-fi system truly shine.

EQUIPMENT

This is my first time experiencing a Kaleidescape product and, having read reviews of the company's other models and salivating over various images on its website, I was a little taken aback by just how compact the unit was when I opened the box. Its diminutive dimensions make it easy to accommodate in/on TV units and, thankfully, an optional faceplate is available for mounting onto an equipment rack, along with a dual faceplate for use with a compact Terra Prime server. You'll likely need the latter if you want to hold on to more than the six 4K titles that you can save locally on the device's 480GB internal solid state drive.

Despite its compact size, the Strato E still very much looks like a premium product. It's built with black perforated steel, with the perforations allowing you to take a peek at the circuitry inside. Upon startup, a blue light glows through them and turns off during use so as not to distract you from the main event.

The ventilation afforded by the perforations means the Strato E remains cool and completely silent during use too.

Connecting the Strato E to your TV or home theatre system is via HDMI only and Kaleidescape provides a THX Certified cable in the box. The only other ports on the rear of the unit are gigabit Ethernet for wired networking – essential, as there's no Wi-Fi connectivity – a USB-A port for connecting external storage devices or a disc drive, and the 12V power input. The power cable integrates a brick, and both

> "Despite its compact size, the Strato E still very much looks like a premium product."

cables at either end of it are relatively long, so you should have little issue getting everything connected in your space.

A remote control is also supplied. It's a simple unit, although it adopts a trapezoid shape for a touch of style. It does the job well, although it would've been nice for the buttons to have been backlit, especially considering owners will likely be operating it in a darkened home cinema space. Fortunately, a highly capable smartphone app is also available to use to control the player. It has the added benefit of letting you use the phone's built-in keyboard to type in search terms.

As I alluded to earlier, the Strato E is the cheapest in Kaleidescape's lineup to support 4K Ultra HD movies, along with HDR10 and Dolby Vision HDR formats. It supports image resolutions up to 4K (3,840 x 2,160) at a maximum frame rate of 60p, alongside Dolby Atmos and DTS:X soundtracks. The more expensive Strato V does the same, so to get the Strato E down to a more approachable price, Kaleidescape has dropped the internal storage from 960GB to 480GB and removed a few of the connections from the player's rear panel.

The limited storage is something any potential buyer should think carefully about, as it's only enough space to store around six 4K movies, downloaded from the Kaleidescape Movie Store, at any one time. The only way to expand the storage is to invest in one of the company's Terra Prime servers, but with prices for these starting at $12,499, it's a sizeable extra expense that only the most dedicated (and deep-pocketed) cinephiles and audiophiles will likely be able to consider.

MOVIE STORE

Aside from the players' hardware might, Kaleidescape's other key selling point is its Movie Store. Not only is it the only way of obtaining content to watch, but it's a gorgeous and fun interface to interact with. Content is displayed in rows that can be scrolled through quickly, with posters looking vibrant and sharp. It provides plenty of information for each title, including video and sound quality, cast and crew and even Rotten Tomatoes critic ratings. Searching for something specific is mostly a fuss-free affair, especially when using the smartphone app because you can quickly type in a title using your phone's keyboard. I was surprised (and a little disappointed) to find, however, that typing in 'Dolby Atmos' didn't return any results. I eventually found filters when browsing the Movie Store within the smartphone app, including one for Dolby Atmos, among many others, so the search isn't quite as intuitive as it perhaps could be.

> "It's a quick and easy way to discover new titles and a feature I found myself using an awful lot."

One particularly handy feature of the Movie Store is the ability to summon related content when hovering over a particular title. For example, when highlighting *Top Gun: Maverick*, you can press the Kaleidescape logo button on the smartphone app, or navigate to Explore > Related Content on the movie's information page using the physical remote, and the Movie Store interface kicks into action, reorganising all available and related content around it.

This includes movies similar in style and genre; for the *Top Gun* example, I was presented with Tom Cruise movies and other content either from the same director or starring the supporting actors. It's a quick and easy way to instantly discover new titles and a feature I found myself using an awful lot — and not only for the aforementioned means of discovery, but also because watching all the poster thumbnails float around my TV screen was just cool to see.

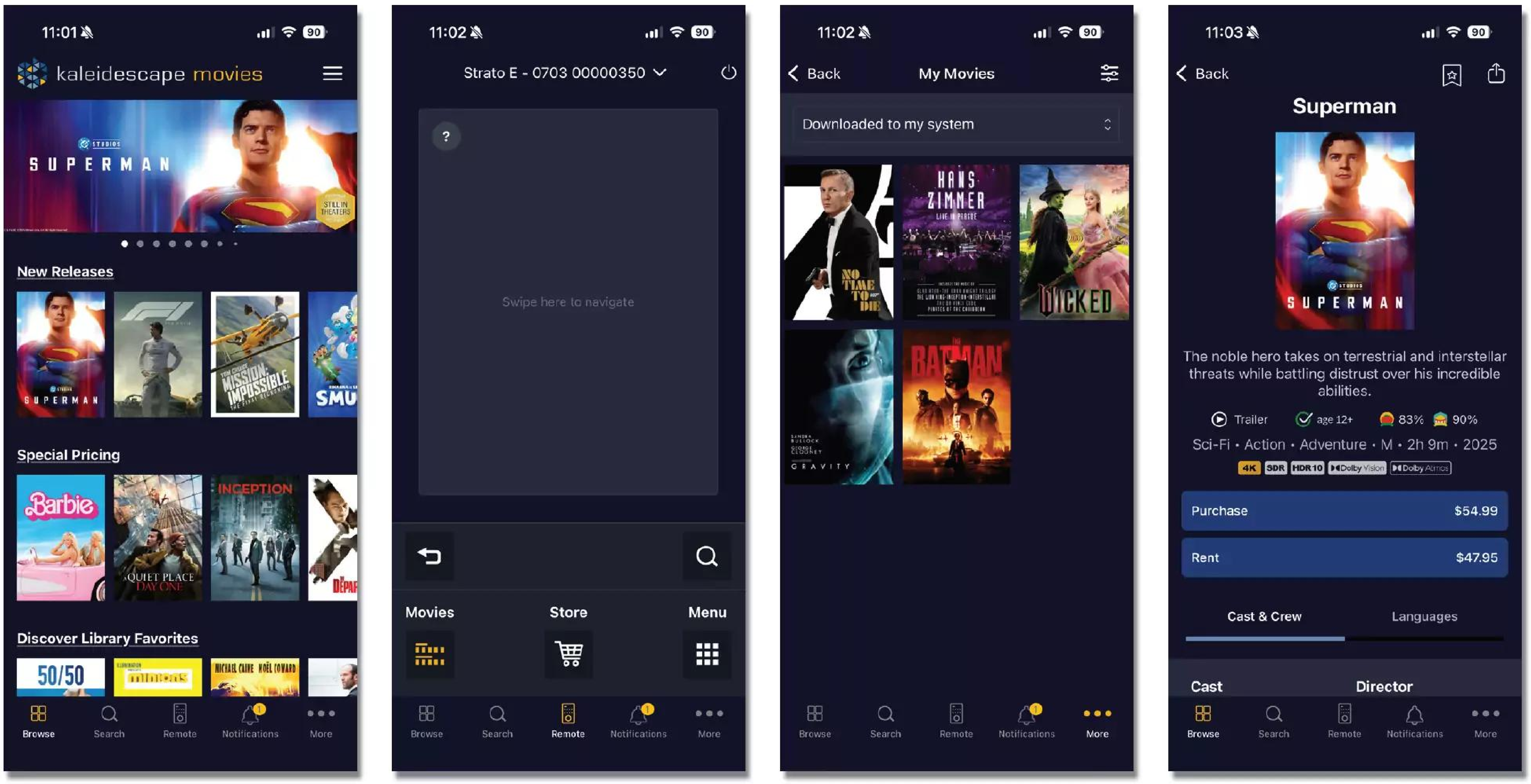
As is the case with the plethora of video streaming services we subscribe to, however, the content you can access depends on where you live. The US gets the best version of the Movie Store, with many titles available to buy and download before they're released on physical media. At the time of writing, the Australian store is lagging behind other territories with regard to the amount of content available. Kaleidescape says there's approximately 5,000 titles on the Aussie store (compared to nearly 15K in the US). The company promises it will continue to populate the store with more titles in all territories where Kaleidescape players are available.

While this may seem limited, I was happy with the amount of content available in Australia, and I was pleasantly surprised by the cost of movies, which is generally comparable to 4K Blu-ray discs —and sometimes even a bit cheaper.

As mentioned earlier, its 480GB of solid state storage means there's only enough space for around six 4K movies, but the Strato E can also upscale HD or SD movies to great effect and, owing to their smaller file size, you can store more of these on the Strato E. For the absolute best quality, however, you'll want to stick with 4K quality.

Any movies you buy will remain on your account in the cloud, so if you run out of space and want to download something new, an older movie can be removed from storage to be freely accessed and downloaded again at a later date.

To help build your collection, the company offers the option to catalogue any Blu-rays or DVDs you already own by connecting an external disc drive with the USB input to trigger the Strato E to enter a Recognition Mode. I wasn't able to test this feature as I don't have an external disc drive, but in essence, all you need to do is insert a disc and the player will search the Movie Store for a digital version that you can then purchase to download. The company says that you can usually download that title at a discounted rate,



The app for iOS and Android provides an intuitive and easy method to control playback on the Strato E, and instant access to the Movie Store.

although pricing is influenced by each production studio. What's more, if you only own a DVD and the Movie Store has a 4K version, you can purchase the higher-quality version if you wish.

If you do want to expand your local storage space, you'll need to invest in a Terra Prime server. Prices start at $12,499 for a 12TB HDD and currently max out at an eye-watering $139,999 for 123TB. A server can provide simultaneous playback to up to 25 Kaleidescape players in one home, should you have the space, need and, importantly, budget.

If you do want to build an enviable library of content, then a server will be practically a necessity, as the key factor allowing the Strato E to deliver such high quality is that it's not limited to a file size or bit rate. Compare this to 4K Blu-ray discs that have storage limitations, or the best streaming services that compress movies so they can run with minimal buffering, and you start to realise why Kaleidescape movie players command the price tags attached.

SETUP

Kaleidescape has made the Strato E as fuss-free to set up as possible. Simply plug it into mains power, insert an Ethernet cable and connect it to your TV or AV processor via HDMI and you're away. You'll be met with some onscreen instructions that are easy to follow and understand, and you'll soon be able to access the movie store and enjoy the content.

You'll need to set up an account with Kaleidescape, including providing card information as a means of payment to purchase movies or TV shows from the online store on an ongoing basis. While you can access essential settings via the player itself, there's also a web-based interface that offers greater control. To access this, you'll need to enter the player's IP address (found in the settings menu) into a browser on your computer.

You'll soon learn the majority of settings on the web interface can be left as is, because the Strato E can determine what your system is capable of in terms of video and audio quality, and optimise itself accordingly to perform at its best. For example, it will be able to determine if you have a 4K display with a 5.1-channel speaker system, and so won't try to output a Dolby Atmos soundtrack. If you use a projector, you can also adjust the aspect ratio to fit a 2.35:1 screen.

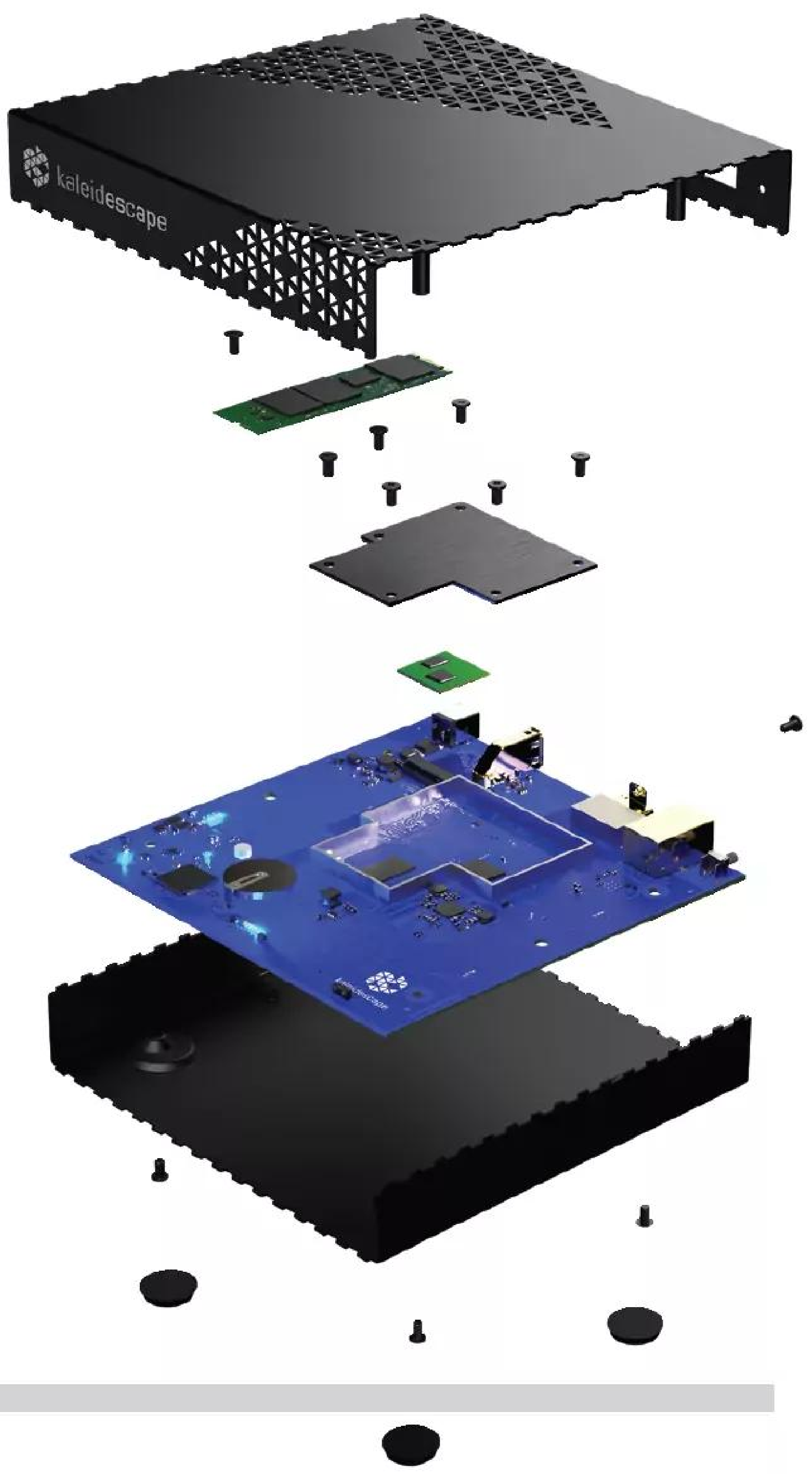
Once you've found something you want to watch, then as mentioned, you need to first download it — there's no streaming. Due to the large file sizes, a very high-speed internet connection is practically a necessity if you want to minimise the time it takes from selecting a movie to watching it. In my Sydney apartment, I'm limited to a 100Mbps NBN connection, which made me nervous that it would take days to download a single title.

When I set *The Batman* to download, it had an immediate effect on my network, and shows I was trying to stream on other services kept buffering — all of the available bandwidth was going to Kaleidescape.

To get around this problem, I set *The Batman*, along with *Wicked* and *Gravity*, to download overnight and sure enough, when I woke up the next morning, they were there. Remember when you'd wake up as a kid on Christmas morning to see presents under the tree? That was the exact feeling I had that morning.

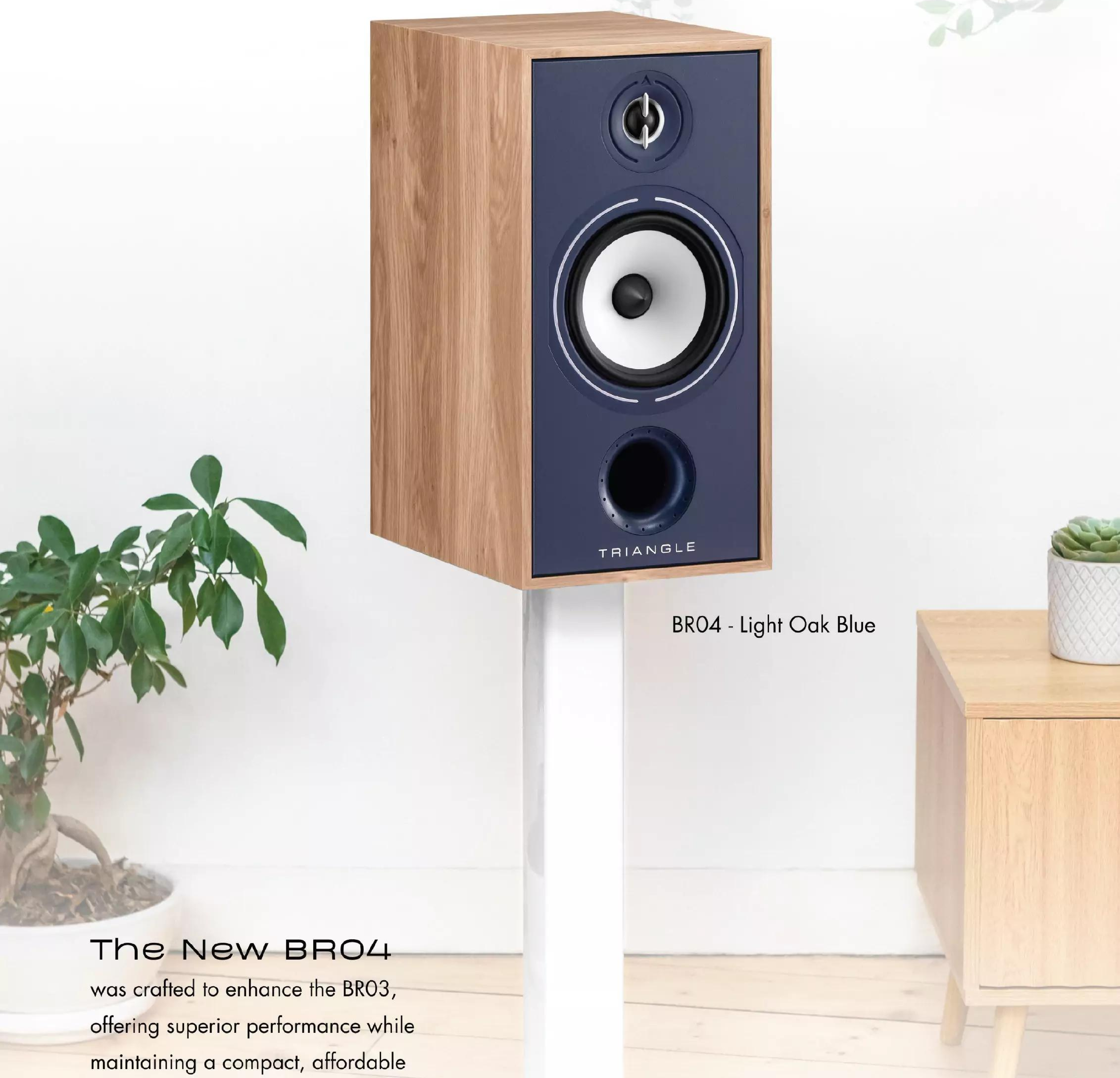
The app lets you know how long each

You'll need a high-speed internet connection for quicker downloads, and a Terra Prime server if you want to build a large content library.



TRIANGLE
MANUFACTURE ELECTROACOUSTIQUE

BOREA



BR04 - Light Oak Blue

The New BR04

was crafted to enhance the BR03, offering superior performance while maintaining a compact, affordable design. These efforts provide upgraded performance, especially in the bass, while retaining the qualities that made the BOREA range successful.

audio marketing

Strato E can easily be tucked behind a TV or placed on a shelf. For a more customised installation, official Kaleidescape rack shelves and wall mount solutions are available.

piece of content took to download, with *The Batman* taking the longest at just under three hours (*Gravity*, being an HD movie, finished in 40 minutes). Kaleidescape says if you have at least a 1Gbps internet connection, you can reduce the download time of a 4K movie to around 10 minutes.

If you have a high-speed home internet connection, you can also set the maximum download speed for Kaleidescape. For example, with a 1Gbps plan, you could set Kaleidescape to top out at 600Mbps, leaving you bandwidth so you can continue to watch other content at the same time.

IN USE

Having read reviews of other Kaleidescape products, and having a good understanding of what makes the brand so appealing to home theatre enthusiasts, it's safe to say I had high expectations of the Strato E. And those expectations were exceeded. For context, I had the Strato E connected to an 83-inch LG G5 TV and a Sonos home theatre system comprising the Arc Ultra soundbar, two Era 300s for surrounds and a Sub 3.

Movies and shows look and sound stunning via the Strato E. Colours are exemplary; blacks and shadow detail are the best I've seen from any home-entertainment source device, and Dolby Atmos soundtracks — which are delivered in full lossless audio — more than prove why Kaleidescape demands the money it does. If picture and sound quality are important to you, you'll notice a night and day difference between what the Strato E can offer compared to what you get from streaming services and, to an extent, 4K Blu-ray discs.

> ...the player was able to deliver an impactful performance in my modest setup.

The opening scene of *Wicked*, with the Wicked Witch of the West's hat sitting in a puddle, looked absolutely stunning. I compared it to the 4K Blu-ray version using my Sony UBP-X700 player, and noticed extra sharpness and detail when watching on the Strato E. Blacks were slightly deeper and the light reflection on the puddle glistened with greater intensity.

What took me by surprise the most, however, was the Dolby Atmos soundtrack. When the flying monkeys swooped in from behind the viewing position and smashed out of the window, I was blown away by the pinpoint accuracy of the movement from behind my seated position and towards the screen. The effect just wasn't as pronounced when watching the Blu-ray version with the same home-theatre setup.

It was a similar story when watching *Gravity*. Not only did the picture look incredible – the Strato E did a fantastic job of upscaling HD content, with the deep blacks of space well-defined and brighter lights shining with great intensity – but the Atmos mix was conveyed expertly through my speaker system. When Sandra Bullock and George Clooney's characters are spinning out of control at the beginning of the movie, the soundtrack panned around my living room to great effect.

The Strato E truly shines with live concert recordings. As mentioned in this issue's lead-in, I downloaded and watched *Hans Zimmer: Live in Prague* — available in 4K Dolby Vision and, crucially, in Dolby Atmos. I'd seen the soundtrack maestro perform in Sydney earlier this year — if you ever get the chance, you won't regret it — so I was curious whether a Kaleidescape playback could capture the same energy.

It did. The scale of the music hit me from the first note. My Sonos home theatre system was finally given a soundtrack that pushed its limits — I hadn't realised how convincingly it could handle the dynamics of Zimmer's iconic scores. When The Dark Knight Trilogy suite kicked in with the test-track favourite 'Like a Dog Chasing Cars', the Strato E expertly reproduced the shifts from hushed, delicate passages — a lone violin or a subtle electronic texture — to the thunderous crescendos of the full orchestra, all without sounding compressed or strained. That sense of contrast gave the performance real drama and made the experience feel startlingly lifelike. While I didn't have a Dolby Atmos passive speaker system to test the Strato E's talents — nor the dedicated home cinema space — the player was able to deliver an impactful performance in my modest setup. Those with full Atmos rigs are in for a treat.

CONCLUSION

If you want to replace your entire home movie library with the Kaleidescape system, then make no mistake, it's going to be an expensive endeavour. What I appreciated the most, however, is that you can feasibly make do with the player by itself, as long as you're OK with the restrictions that come with limited onboard storage.

It is targeted at cinephiles first and foremost, but I think audiophiles stand to benefit the greatest, given how well uncompressed soundtracks are delivered to a surround speaker system.

Max Langridge

SPECS & CONTACT

RRP: $5,299
Built-in storage: 480GB SSD
Resolutions: Up to 4K (3,840 x 2,160) 60p
Bit rate: up to 100Mbps
Audio support: Dolby TrueHD, Dolby Atmos, DTS:X, DTS-HD Master Audio
HDR Support: Dolby Vision and HDR 10
Aspect ratios: 1.78:1 and 2.35:1 (automatic or user interface selectable)
Connectivity: HDMI 2.1
Dimensions: 16.26 x 2.8 x 16.26 cm / 6.4 x 1.1 x 6.4 inches

Distributor: Audio Active Australia
T: (03) 9699 8900
W: www.audioactive.com.au

Pictured: Bronze Series 7G 300 in Black

Bronze Series 7G

Bronze Series 7G blends contemporary design with cutting-edge audio technology. Crafted with precision and enriched by 25 years of acoustic heritage, Bronze Series 7G delivers authentic high-fidelity, redefined for today.

The Bronze 300 7G packs a sonic punch, combining powerful 6-inch C-CAM drivers with an all-new Gold Dome tweeter to deliver high-fidelity sound with dexterity, dynamics and detail.

Listen Again.

Explore more

Wattson Audio Madison

Power Amplifier

+
- Sonic purity
- Super-quiet
- Stereo imaging

−
- Mono mode
- Mains power switch
- Unusual shape

RRP **$10,300**

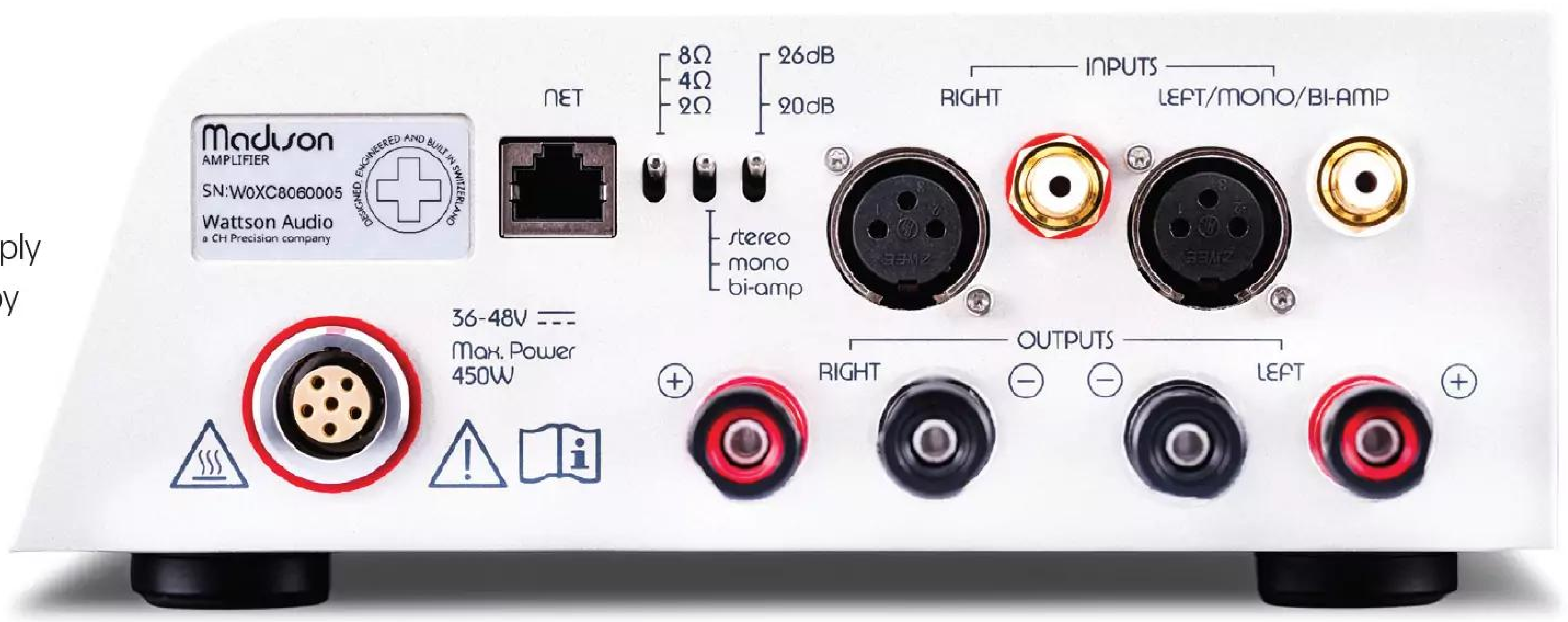
The external design of the Wattson Audio Madison Power Amplifier is so unique, as you can see from the photograph above, that it really only makes sense that you partner it with Wattson Audio's preamplifier. Although if you do, you'll discover that the dimensions of the two components are different and, as a result, some of the design elements, such as the three grooves etched in the top surface, do not align with each other. For the purpose of this review, however, we will just be looking at the Madison as a stand-alone component.

THE EQUIPMENT

Before we can start the review at all, however, we need to get some housekeeping out of the way, because if you peruse the internet, you'll find references to two seemingly different versions of Wattson Audio's 'Madison' power amplifier, one named 'Madison' and the other named the 'Madison Lounge Edition' (which, even more confusingly, is sometimes referred to as a 'Madison LE').

According to Alexandre Lavanchy (see inset box), the 'Lounge Edition' of the amplifier, although it was reviewed, was not a production model but instead just a prototype, and had a completely different power supply to the Madison reviewed here, which is an actual production model. Says Lavanchy "The initial prototype we presented in 2024 had a traditional linear power supply, with two toroidal transformers. We were not happy with the 'grip' of the amplifier on low impedance speakers. For this reason we changed entirely the power supply concept and went for an external AC to DC unit. Inside the amplifier enclosure, we have two main DC/DC isolated voltage converters producing the rails for the amplifier. These converters work at a frequency close to 300kHz, far from the audible bandwidth. We went quite a long engineering path to make this work properly (one entire year actually) but are convinced it was worth it."

Interestingly, this decision about the power supply makes the Wattson Audio Madison the first power amplifier I can recall reviewing that has an outboard power supply made not by itself, but by a third party, because the outboard AC to DC converter that delivers 36-volts



of direct current to the Madison is a GST360A36-C6P switch-mode supply that is designed and manufactured by Meanwell Enterprises of New Taipai City, Taiwan. Rather interesting (though only for those interested in international politics) is that the label on the power supply identifies it as being 'Made in China' so at least some Taiwanese consider Taiwan to be part of China. As for the Madison amplifier itself, that is 'Designed, Engineered and Built in Switzerland' according to the circular sticker placed on its rear panel.

The provision of an external supply makes it more difficult for any mains hum to creep into the audio circuitry, but it also means that the Madison does not have a mains power switch — the press-button at the top of the front panel only switches between On and Standby… though it does also allow you to select which input you'd like to use: balanced or unbalanced, and turn the speakers on and off. The lack of a mains power switch means that, as the Owner's Manual says: *"The power socket must remain accessible because it is the only means of disconnecting from the electrical network."*

The rear panel of the Madison sports three toggle-style micro-switches aligned in a row. The first of these is a three-way type with positions for 8-, 4- and 2-ohms; the second is also a three-way type, with positions for 'Stereo', 'Mono' and 'Biamp'; the third is a two-way type with positions marked 26dB and 20dB.

As you'd imagine, the 26dB/20dB switch adjusts the overall gain of the Madison, with the 26dB setting providing the additional gain necessary for the amplifier to deliver its rated output power in the event that the source voltage is too low to enable this with the 20dB setting.

Also as you'd imagine, the three-way switch with 8-ohm, 4-ohm and 2-ohm settings is intended to optimise the output circuitry of the Madison to best-suit the nominal impedance of your loudspeakers. However, while I would expect to see such a switch on a valve amplifier, it is exceedingly unusual to find one on a solid-state amplifier, which the Madison most definitely is. According to Lavanchy, this switch *"modifies the power supply rail voltages. When set for low impedance, it puts less stress on the output stage which allows the amplifier to handle high currents more easily."* But what if you don't know the impedance of your loudspeakers, or you simply set it incorrectly, I wondered. Apparently, this is not a problem. *"There is no risk at using the amplifier in any setting with any load, it's just a matter of slight optimisation,"* says Lavanchy.

> **"The short version of the foregoing is that the Wattson Audio Madison is a lovely-sounding amplifier."**

As for that third micro-switch, 'Stereo' mode allows the obvious: stereo operation! When the switch is set to the middle ('Biamp') position, any signal at the left-channel input is sent to both the left and right channels. *"This mode is ideal for vertically bi-amping loudspeakers with two pairs of independent binding posts,"* says Madison's Owner's Manual. *"Use two Madison Amplifiers to create a stereo setup."*

As for the monophonic mode, it wasn't at all what I expected it to be, which I found exceedingly curious. In monophonic mode, the entire power supply is devoted to just the left channel, so the right channel is rendered inoperative. The Owner's Manual explains it thusly: *"This mode is ideal for complex loads and high amplifier demands."*

Why I found this mode 'exceedingly curious' is because with all other amplifiers I have seen that offer a 'monophonic' mode, switching to this mode enables the left and right channels to be bridged, which effectively doubles the amplifier's power output so that although you sacrifice a channel (and therefore require a second amplifier for the other channel) you get twice the power output, whereas with the Madison, you don't get any additional power at all, just a cooler chassis, because the single amplifier is producing less heat.

And speaking of heat, you have probably noticed that the chassis of the Madison is completely enclosed, without any ventilation holes or slots, and there is no external heat-sinking, so the chassis can indeed become more than just warm, such that the Owner's Manual advises: *"Do not operate under high ambient temperatures (>35°C) or with extremely high humidity (>85%)."* Whilst I suspect this is just a McDonalds-style warning — as in words printed on McDonalds coffee cups advising that "Caution, Coffee may be hot!" — Wattson Audio says that actually the amplifier will sort out any over-temperature issues by itself, by automatically switching itself off. The protection circuitry that does this monitors not only the internal temperature of the amplifier itself, but also temperature variations of the power transistors and the (internal) power supply. It also monitors output current to guard against short-circuits. If an error-event is detected the amplifier automatically switches off and all the LEDs on the front panel will flash on and off in yellow to indicate that the protection system has been activated.

As you should be able to see from our photograph of the Madison's rear panel, XLR sockets are provided for balanced input connection, RCA sockets for unbalanced input connection and multi-way terminal posts for loudspeaker connection. The Ethernet connection (NET) is simply to facilitate firmware updates; it has no other application.

The Madison power amplifier measures (at its widest points, since the amplifier is not rectangular) 216×300×87mm (WDH) where that stated depth does not account for the speaker terminal protrusions. The amplifier weighs 6.0kg. The outboard

Behind Wattson Audio

Despite being entirely a Swiss concern, Wattson Audio is named in honour of Scottish engineer James Watt, after whom the SI electrical unit the “watt” was named. The company was created as the result of a rather fortuitous train of events which began way back on April 14, 2005, when the Swiss company ABC PCB was established for the purpose of “developing and commercialising electronic equipment for the measurement instruments, audio and computer sectors.” ABC PCB was established by equal partners Florian Cossy (who would go on to found CH Precision in 2015) and Michel Hertzschuch. Two years later Hertzschuch sold his shares in ABC PCB to Cossy then, in 2009, Cossy sold shares in his now wholly-owned company to none other than Alexandre Lavanchy (who would later go on to co-found Wattson Audio). ABC PCB transitioned into a new company called Engineered SA in which corporate incarnation Herve Delatraz (of Dartzeel Audio) became a board member. Lavanchy then founded Wattson Audio in 2020 with co-founders Guy Cheval (Rhapsody Hi-Fi) and Philippe Day (both of whom had previously worked for both ABC PCB and Engineered SA). To complete the circle, Florian Cossy’s company CH Precision acquired the Wattson Audio brand in April 2024. Commenting on the purchase, Cossy said, *“By incorporating Wattson Audio’s engineering team and products under the CH umbrella, we create an even greater concentration of audio design and engineering talent. It also opens a tremendous range of new market opportunities in which to apply our combined experience and technologies.”* For his part, Lavanchy said of the acquisition: *“It’s great to be working even more closely with Florian and his team once again. Modern products are incredibly hardware and software intensive: combining the resources of CH Precision and Wattson Audio gives both companies unparalleled access to design bandwidth and capability.”*

power supply for the amplifier is 220mm deep, 95mm wide and 50mm high. The umbilical cord that connects its low-voltage output to the Madison (via a multi-pin LEMO connector) is one metre long, so you can easily hide it out of sight (which would be a good aesthetic choice, because of its large, coffin-like and jet black appearance).

IN USE AND LISTENING SESSIONS

If I were asked the single most notable characteristic of Wattson Audio’s Madison, you’d need to wait quite a while for an answer, because I’d be torn between its lack of noise, which not only renders silences truly silent, but also makes it possible to hear even the tiniest musical details, and its superbly extended frequency response, such that low frequencies extend down into the subterranean and the high frequencies out far enough to make bats envious. Oh, and did I not mention the incredible precision of the stereo imaging and the depth of the soundstage? The short version of the foregoing is that the Wattson Audio Madison is a lovely-sounding amplifier.

The Madison’s lovely sound is evidenced by the delightful (and very catchy) album *Tunnel Vision*, from Beach Bunny. Founder, vocalist, rhythm guitarist and lyricist extraordinaire Lill Trifilio is supremely talented. The sound quality of this album is exceptionally good, too, particularly the drums, which are expertly played by Jon Alvarado. He’s a very clean, very precise musician, as you’ll hear for yourself. I seem to be at odds with the majority of Beach Bunny fans because my favourite track is not 'Vertigo' but 'Clueless', even though I don’t particularly like the treatment of Trifilio’s voice on this track (listen to her vocal on 'Big Pink Bubble' by way of comparison). That said, it’s likely you won’t hear these differences unless you’re listening via amplification with the superior sonic qualities that are exhibited by this Wattson Audio offering.

The purity of the sound of the Madison certainly helped me get a grip on Miley Cyrus’s most recent offering, Something 'Beautiful', which is so sonically complex as to almost beggar belief, though I suspect this might be partially to take your mind away from the lyrical content, which is not strong. Though this album was Cyrus’s concept, it’s actually a team effort with collaborators Maxx Morando, Cole Haden, Shawn Everett, Jonathan Rado and Michael Pollack, plus more than enough additional musicians to put an orchestral cohort to shame. And drop me a line if you can think of an instrument or a sound effect that isn’t on this album… Cyrus even roped in supermodel Naomi Campbell to help her out on the track 'Every Girl You’ve Ever Loved'. (Campbell gave up her musical career after her only album, *Baby Woman*, bombed in the UK, though one track from it — 'Love & Tears' — charted at number 40 when it was released as a single. Although it bombed in the UK, maybe partly due to New Music Express’s Emma Forrest’s review of it [‘Naomi Campbell’s debut singing effort is stubbornly not as bad as it should be. Her voice is an inoffensive, ineffectual whining alto’] Campbell still managed to sell a million or so copies worldwide — mostly in Japan.)

Since I have mentioned Japan, you should take the time to use the Madison to audition the most recent album from Japanese Breakfast, because they’ve finally had the sense to make a professional studio recording, rather than mucking around in a home studio. Don’t pay any attention to the album’s curious name *Melancholy Brunettes (& Sad Women)* which was apparently inspired by a book of short stories called *The World of Apples* by John Cheever. Michelle Zauner’s lyrics are as obtuse and elusive as ever, but if you take the time (and you should) to read her memoir, *Crying in H Mart*, which spent 60 weeks on *The New York Times*’ non-fiction bestseller list, you’ll get a better grip on where she’s coming from. Listen out for Adam Schatz’s sax and see if you can pick who’s playing drums on *Mega Circuit* (don’t peek at the liner notes!).

At one point during my listening sessions, when I’d taken a break to have some dinner, I was surprised when I returned to find the amplifier wasn’t working, which turned out to be because it had switched itself to Standby whilst I was away. It turned out that I’d missed the bit in the Owner’s Manual that clearly states *“To comply with power consumption standards, the amplifier will automatically switch off if there is no music signal for about 40 minutes.”* Doh!

CONCLUSION

Although at first blush the Madison might seem fairly pricey for a relatively low-powered power amplifier, once you consider the boutique nature of the company, the uniqueness of the exterior design and have heard the purity of the sound, you may become convinced that this is the amplifier for you.

Greg Borrowman

THE ULTIMATE CONSUMER TECHNOLOGY...
IN THE SPOTLIGHT!

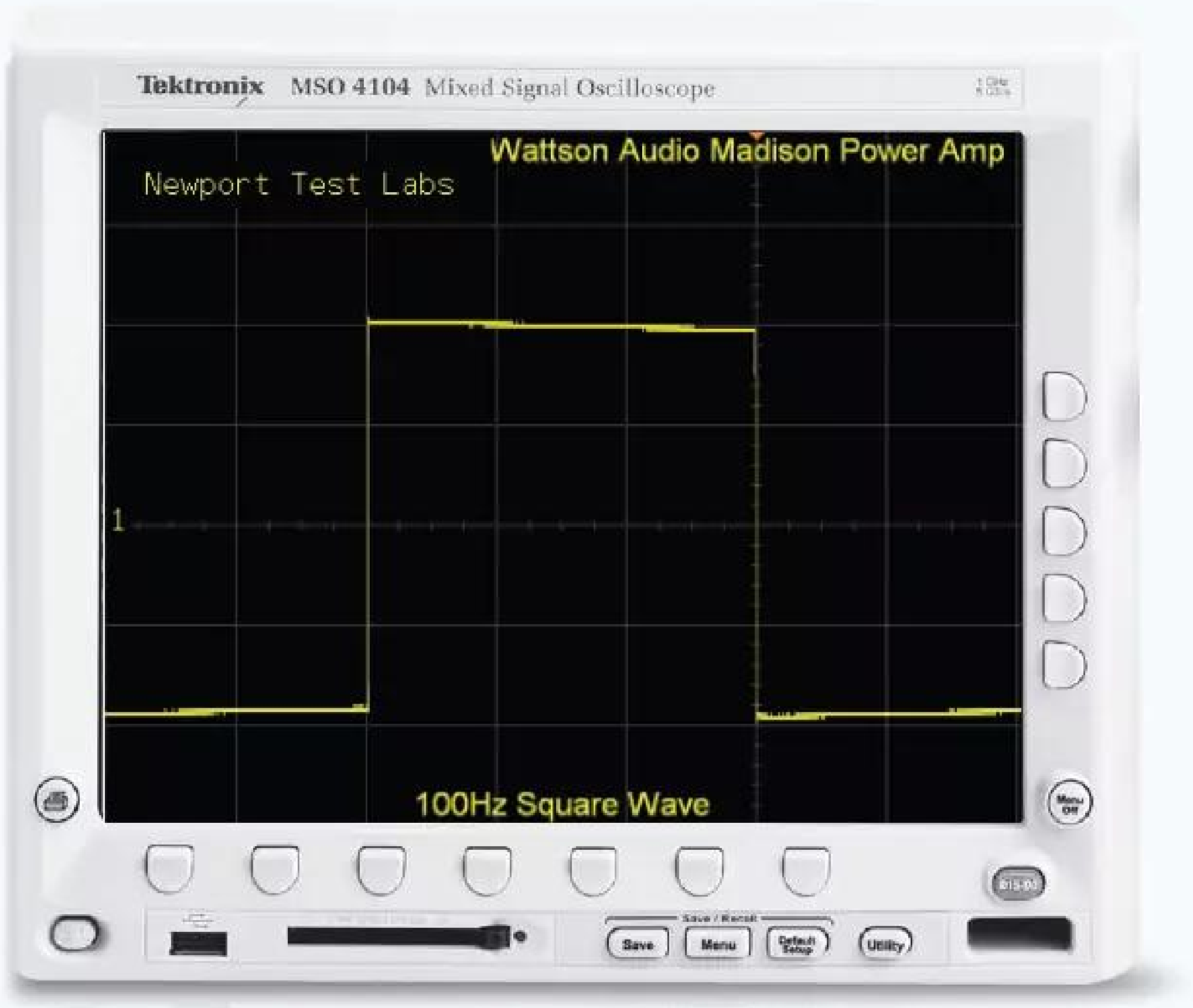
EISA AWARDS 2025-26
visit *www.eisa.eu* for the winners

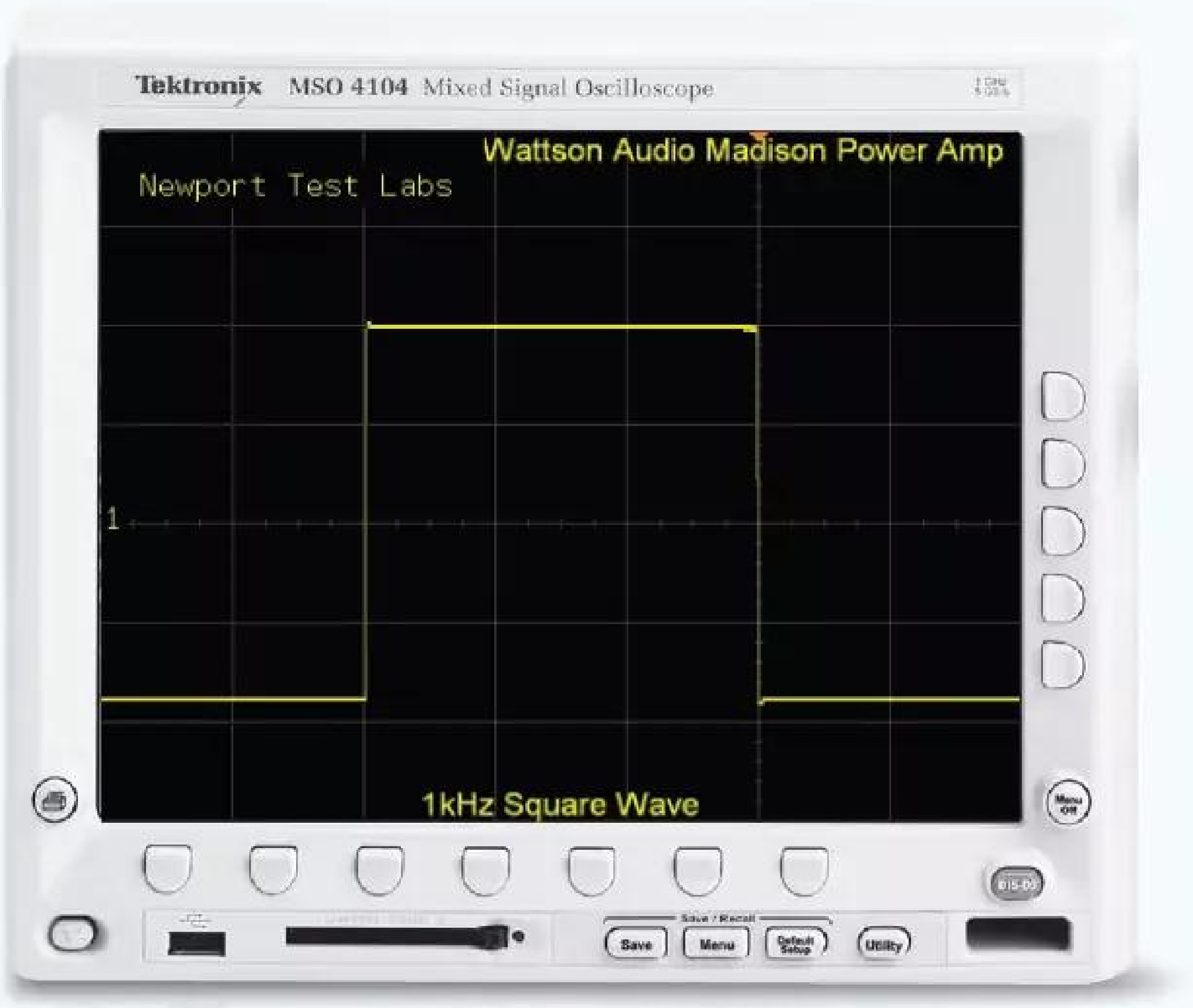
EISA is the unique collaboration of 53 member magazines and websites from 26 countries, specialising in all aspects of consumer electronics from mobile devices, home theatre display and audio products, photography, hi-fi and in-car entertainment. This international association includes expert members in Australia, India, Canada, the Far East, USA and the wider European community, ensuring the EISA Awards and official logo are your guide to the best in global consumer technology!

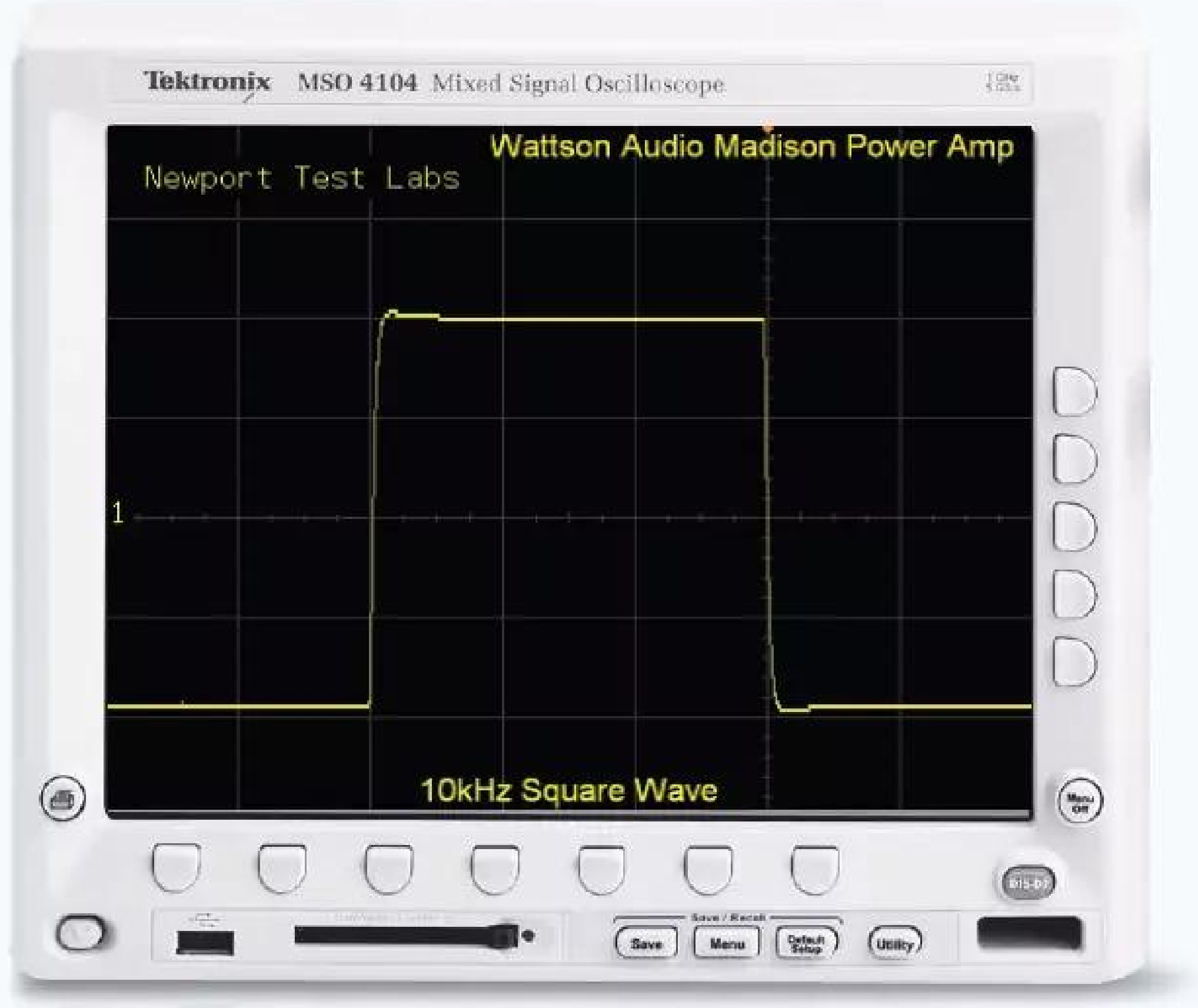
MAIN IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

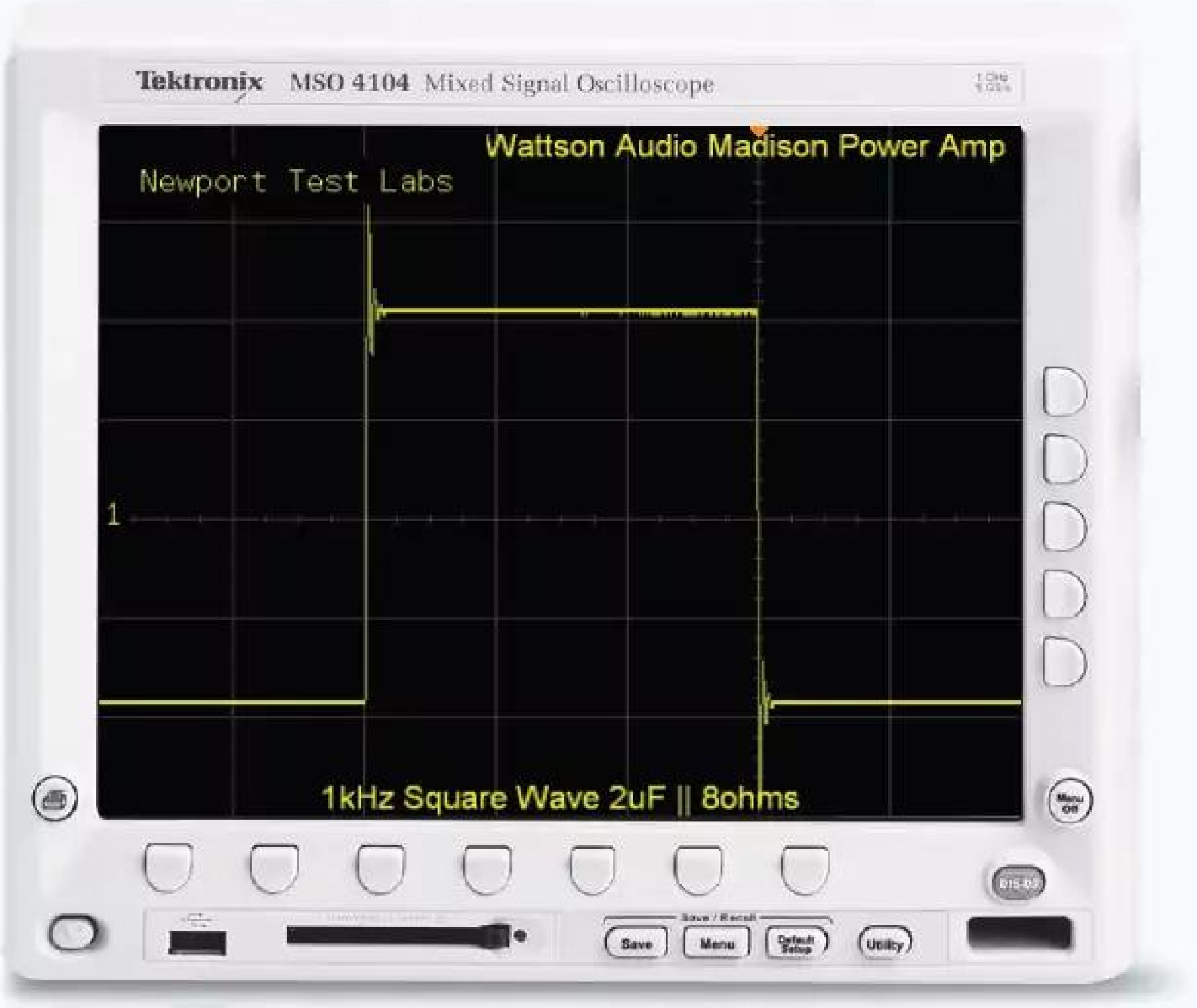
TESTED BY THE EXPERTS ■ WWW.EISA.EU

Laboratory Test Report


Tektronix MSO 4104 Mixed Signal Oscilloscope
Wattson Audio Madison Power Amp
Newport Test Labs
1
100Hz Square Wave


Tektronix MSO 4104 Mixed Signal Oscilloscope
Wattson Audio Madison Power Amp
Newport Test Labs
1
1kHz Square Wave


Tektronix MSO 4104 Mixed Signal Oscilloscope
Wattson Audio Madison Power Amp
Newport Test Labs
1
10kHz Square Wave


Tektronix MSO 4104 Mixed Signal Oscilloscope
Wattson Audio Madison Power Amp
Newport Test Labs
1
1kHz Square Wave 2uF || 8ohms

Newport Test Labs measured the power output of the Wattson Audio Madison power amplifier into standard non-inductive resistive loads as being 50-watts into 8-ohms, with either one or both channels driven, and 91-watts into 4-ohm loads, both channels driven. This meant that the amplifier met its specification with 8-ohm loads, and exceeded it by 16-watts into 4-ohms (nearly 3dB).

When driving 4-ohm loads, *Newport Test Labs* measured the power output as being exactly the same, irrespective of the setting of the Madison's rear panel impedance switch, as shown in the two lowest rows of the tabulated 'Power Output' table. *Newport Test Labs* also reported that there was no difference in power output into 4-ohms measured when using the dedicated 'mono' mode, compared to stereo mode with just a single channel driven. The lab made just one measurement at 1kHz when the Madison was driving both channels into 2-ohms (with the impedance selector set to 2-ohms), which returned a result of 144-watts per channel, considerably higher than Wattson Audio's own power output specification for this impedance.

Wattson Audio's Madison is also a very wideband amplifier, with a very flat audio-band frequency response, as you can see from Graph 10, which shows the response between 5Hz and 40kHz into a non-inductive 8-ohm resistive load (black trace) and into a load that simulates one that would be presented by a two-way, bass reflex loudspeaker (red trace). You can see that the frequency response into the 8-ohm load essentially overlays the 0dB calibration between 30Hz and 20kHz and is only 0.4dB down at 5Hz. The frequency response into the simulated loudspeaker load shows some tiny variations, but overall, both responses, when normalised, are 5Hz to 40kHz ±0.25dB, which is more linear than you'll ever need.

As you can see from the tabulated results, *Newport Test Labs* measured the wideband frequency response as being just 1dB down at 2Hz and 220Hz, and just 3dB down at 1.5Hz and 370kHz. This latter result is close enough to Wattson Audio's own specification of 1Hz to 400kHz –3dB that the differences are within the range of measurement error.

Channel separation was measured at an excellent 93dB at 20Hz, diminishing slightly to 87dB at 1kHz and 67dB at 20kHz, while the balance between the stereo channels was absolutely superb, with a difference of just 0.006dB at 1kHz. Interchannel phase accuracy at this same frequency was also excellent, at just 0.04dB.

THD for a 1kHz signal at one watt into

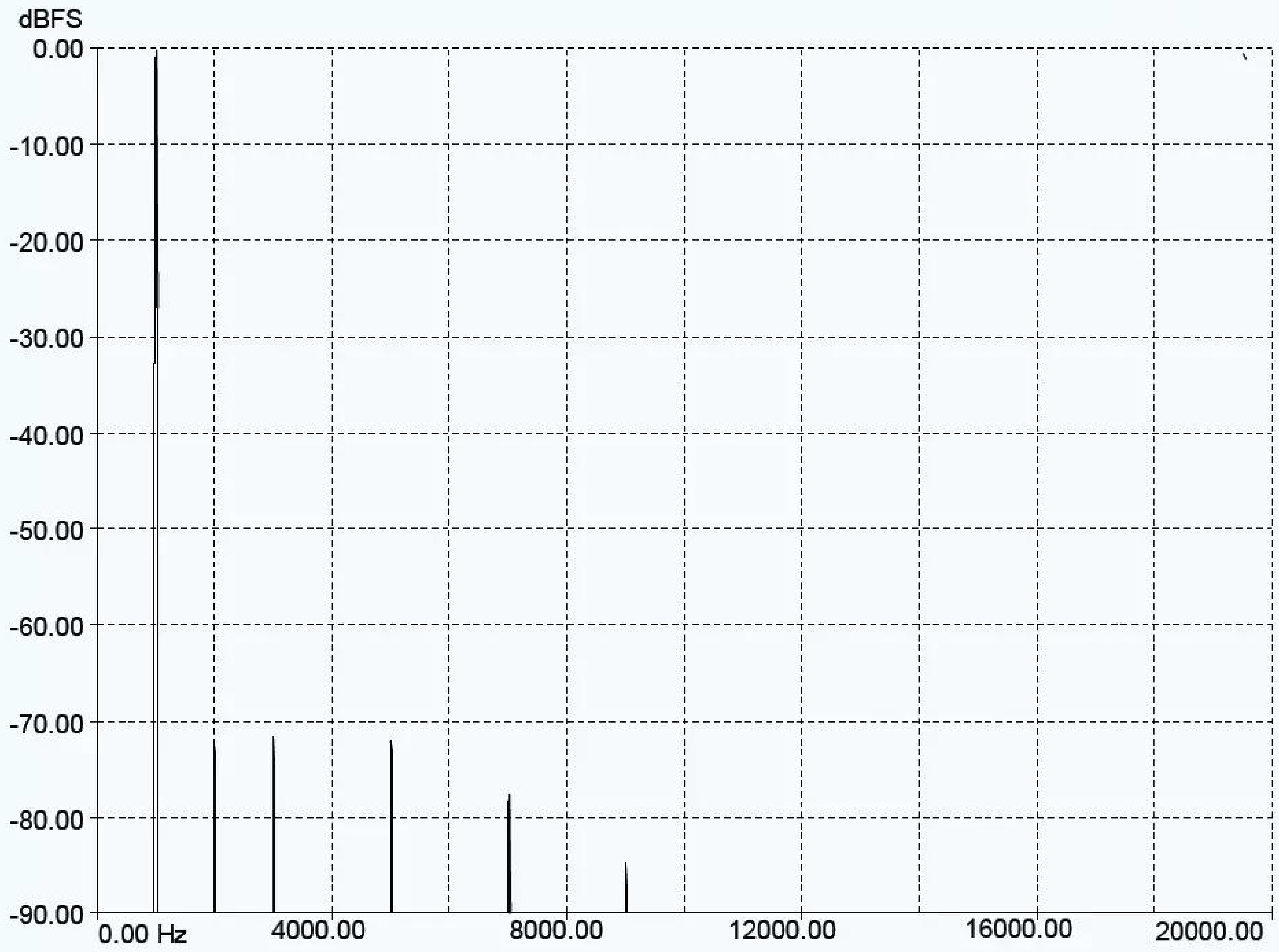
Wattson Audio Madison Power Amplifier – Test Results – Power Output

Channel	Load (Ω)	20Hz (watts)	20Hz (dBW)	1kHz (watts)	1kHz (dBW)	20kHz (watts)	20kHz (dBW)
1	8 Ω	50.5	17.0	50.2	17.0	50.4	17.0
2	8 Ω	50	16.9	50	16.9	50	16.9
2	4 Ω / 8 Ω set	91	19.6	91	19.6	91	19.6
2	4 Ω / 4Ω set	91	19.6	91	19.6	91	19.6

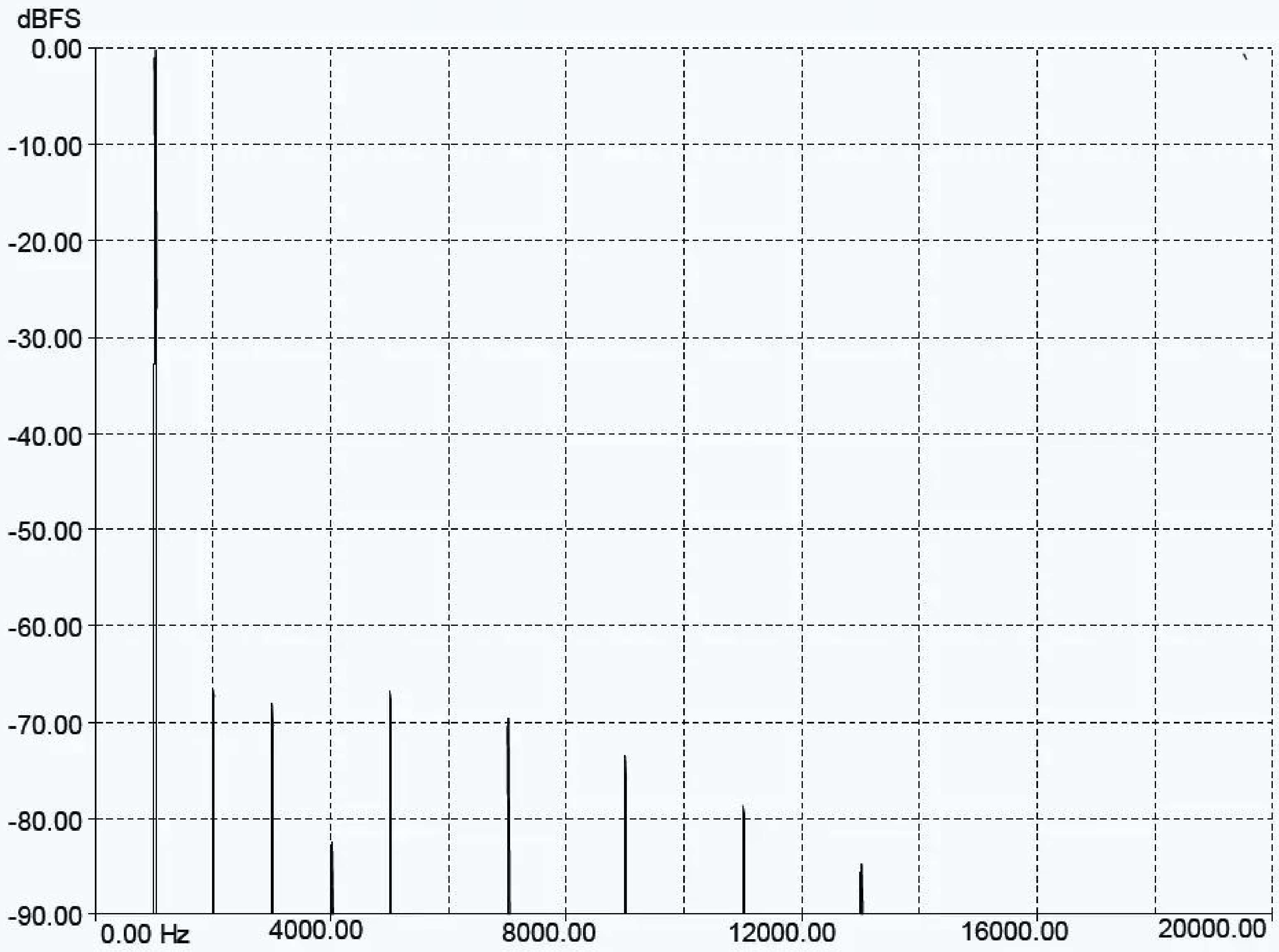
Note: Figures in the dBW column represent output level in decibels referred to one watt output.

Wattson Audio Madison Power Amplifier – Laboratory Test Results

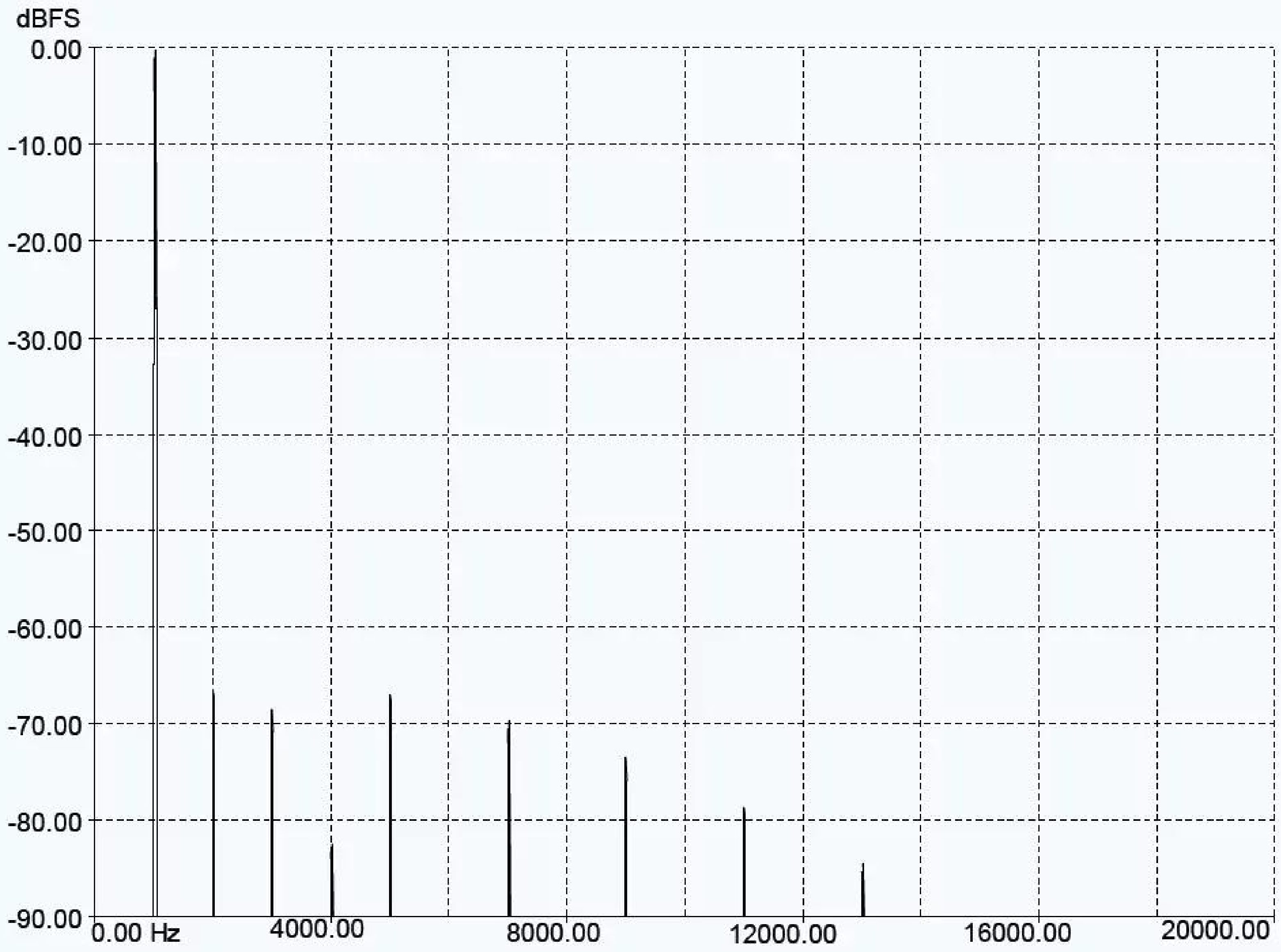
Test	Measured Result	Units/Comment
Frequency Response @ 1 watt o/p	2Hz – 220kHz	–1dB
Frequency Response @ 1 watt o/p	1.5Hz – 370kHz	–3dB
Channel Separation (dB)	93dB / 87dB / 67dB	(20Hz / 1kHz / 20kHz)
Channel Balance	0.006	dB @ 1kHz
Interchannel Phase	0.04	degrees (1kHz)
THD+N	0.058%	@ 1-watt
Signal-to-Noise (unwghted/wghted)	92dB / 99dB	dB referred to 1-watt output
Signal-to-Noise (unwghted/wghted)	110dB / 116dB	dB referred to rated output
Input Sensitivity (26dB gain setting)	140mV / 987mV	(1-watt / rated output)
Input Sensitivity (20dB gain setting)	277mv / 1.98V	(1-watt / rated output)
Damping Factor	49	@1kHz
Power Consumption	0.45 / 27.7	watts (Standby / On)
Power Consumption	48 / 179	watts at 1-watt / at rated output
Mains Voltage Variation during Test	238 – 241	Minimum – Maximum



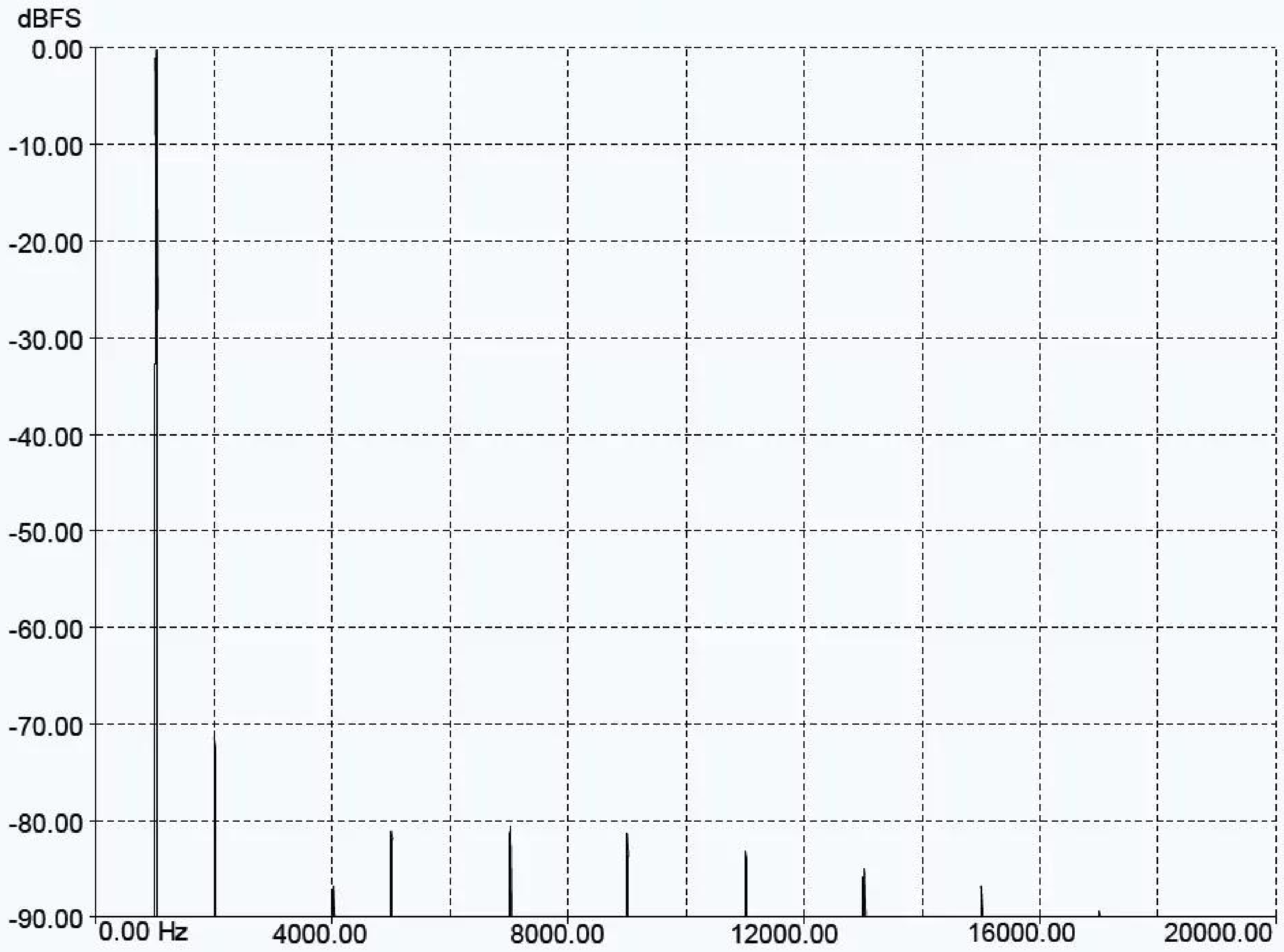
Graph 1. THD at 1kHz at 1-watt into 8-ohms. Load switch set to 8 ohms.



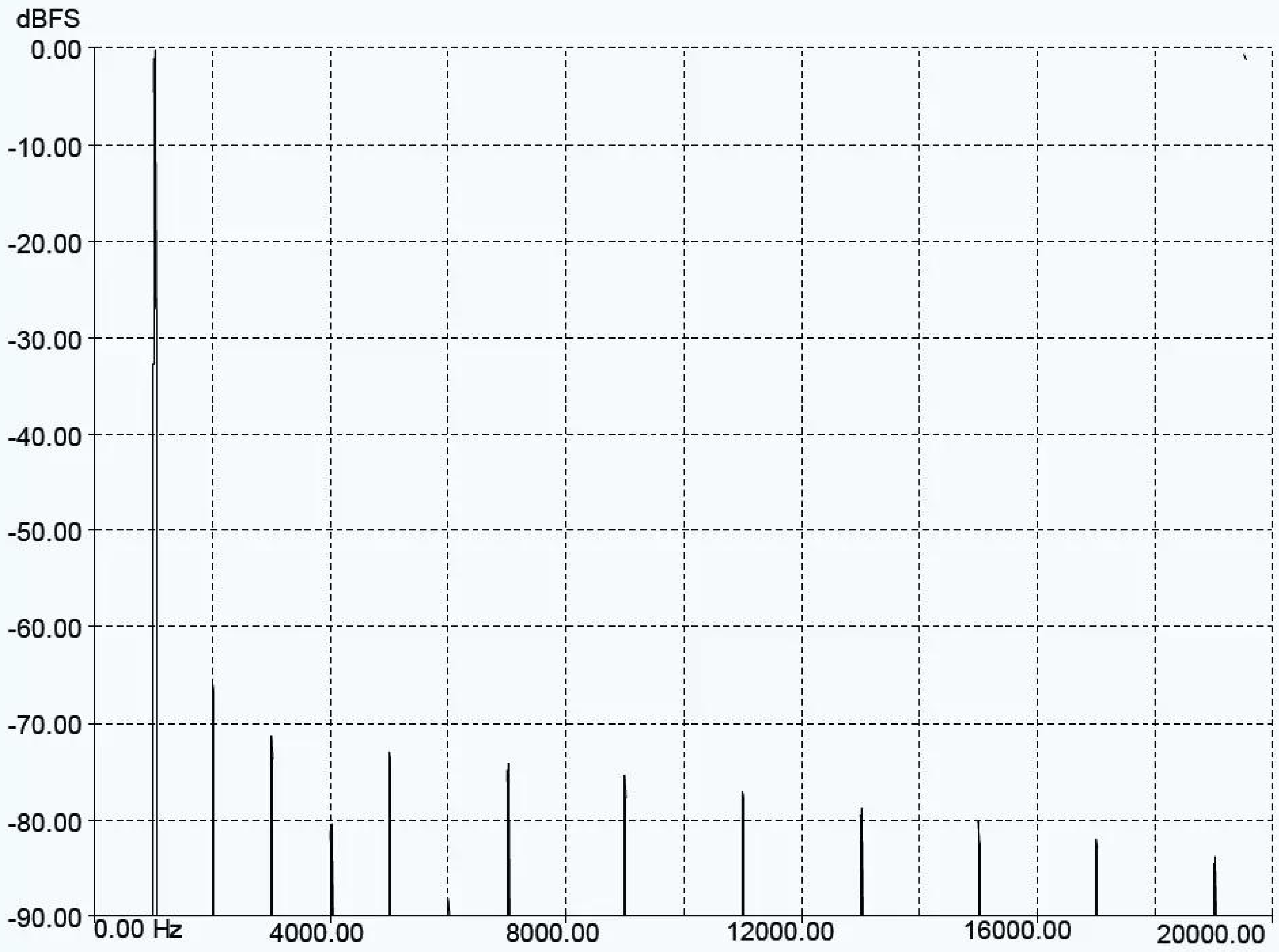
Graph 2. THD at 1kHz at 1-watt into 4-ohms. (Load switch set to 8 ohms.)



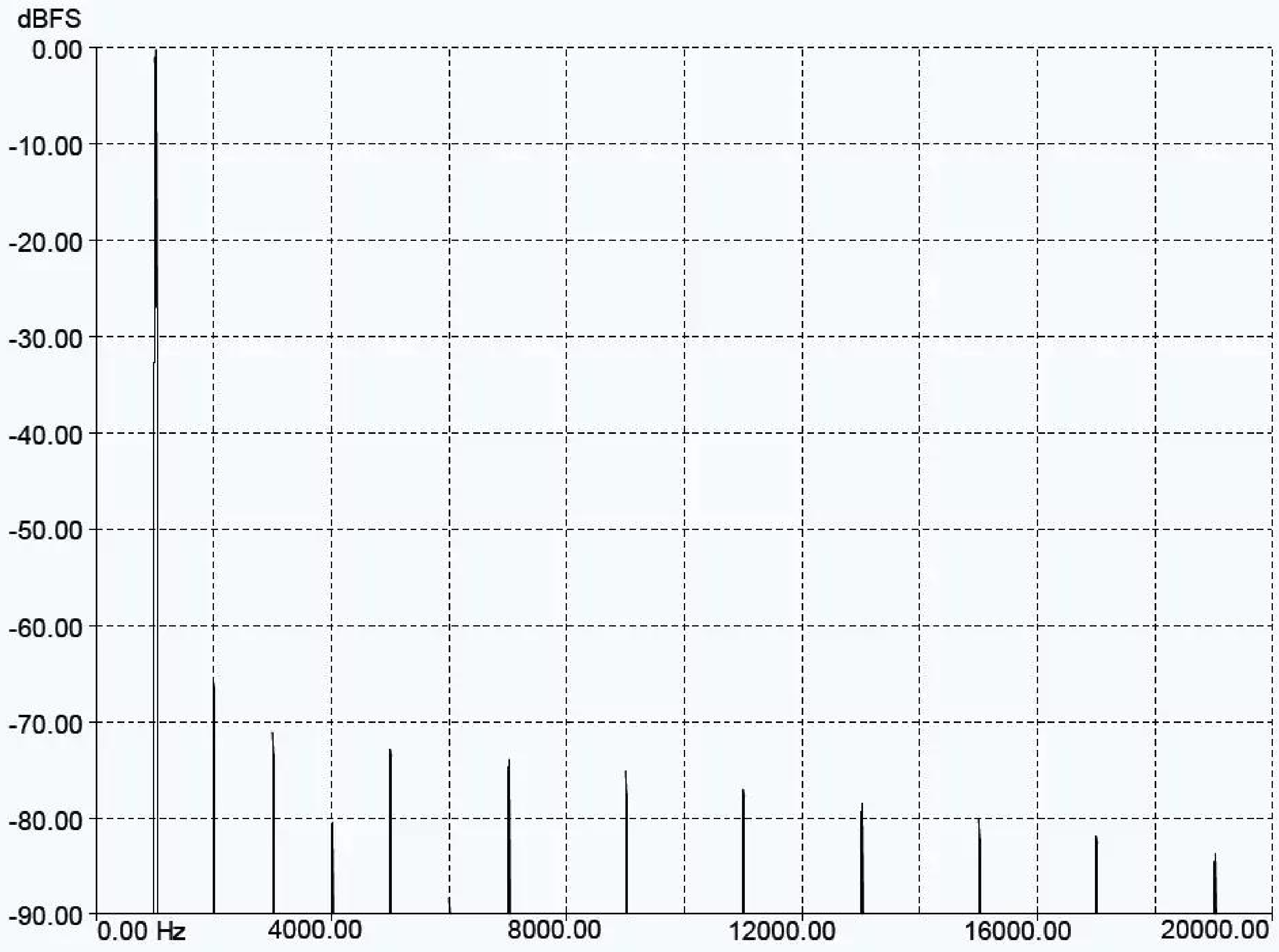
Graph 3. THD at 1kHz at 1-watt into 4-ohms. (Load switch set to 4 ohms.)



Graph 4. THD at 1kHz at 20-watts into 8-ohms. (Load switch set to 8 ohms.)



Graph 5. THD at 1kHz at 20-watts into 4-ohms.
(Load switch set to 8 ohms.)

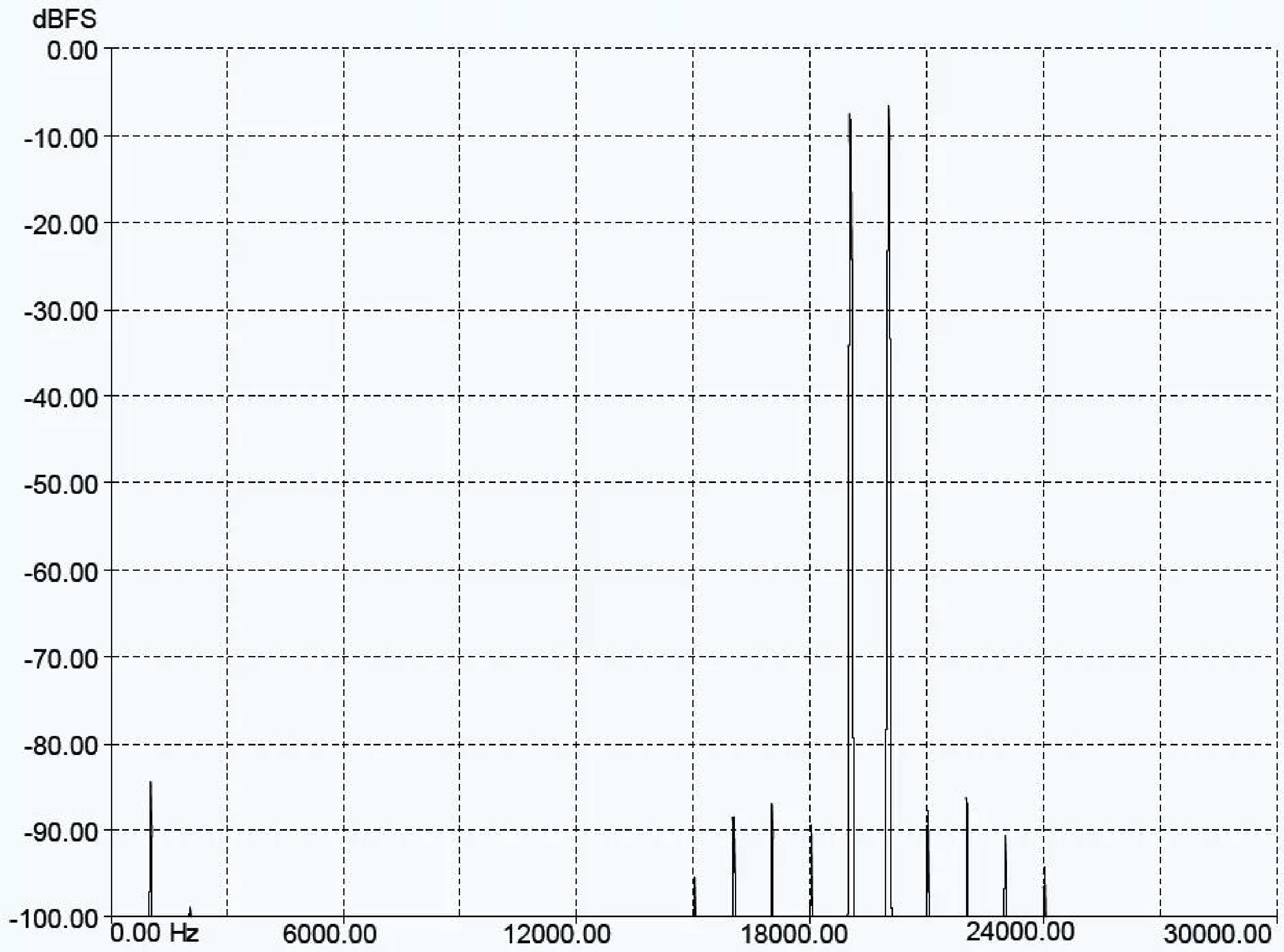


Graph 6. THD at 1kHz at 20-watts into 4-ohms.
(Load switch set to 4 ohms.)

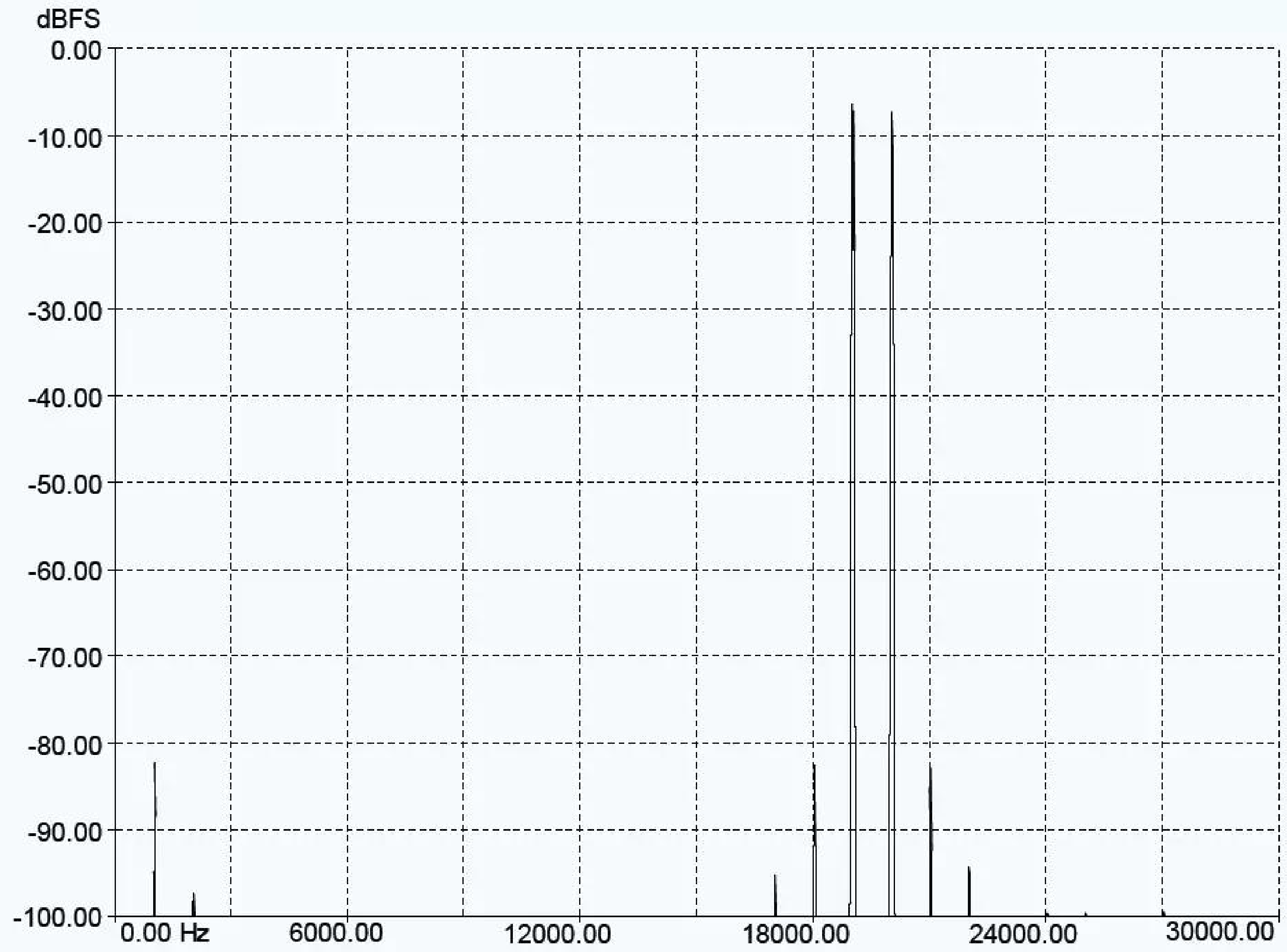
8-ohms is shown in Graph 1 and you can see second-, third- and fifth-order harmonic distortion components each one of which is at around –73dB (0.0223%) after which there's an odd-order component at 7kHz down at –77dB (0.0141%) and another at 9kHz down at –85dB (0.0056%).

When measuring distortion at 1kHz at one watt into a 4-ohm load, *Newport Test Labs* made two measurements, one using the 8-ohm impedance setting (Graph 2) and one using the 4-ohm impedance setting (Graph 3). There are no significant differences between the two graphs, with the 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 7th harmonics clustered around the –70dB level, equivalent to distortion of around 0.0316%, and the higher (all odd-order) harmonics tailing off to the 12th at –85dB (0.0056%). The only significant difference between Graph 1 and these graphs is the presence of a 4th harmonic at –83dB (0.007%).

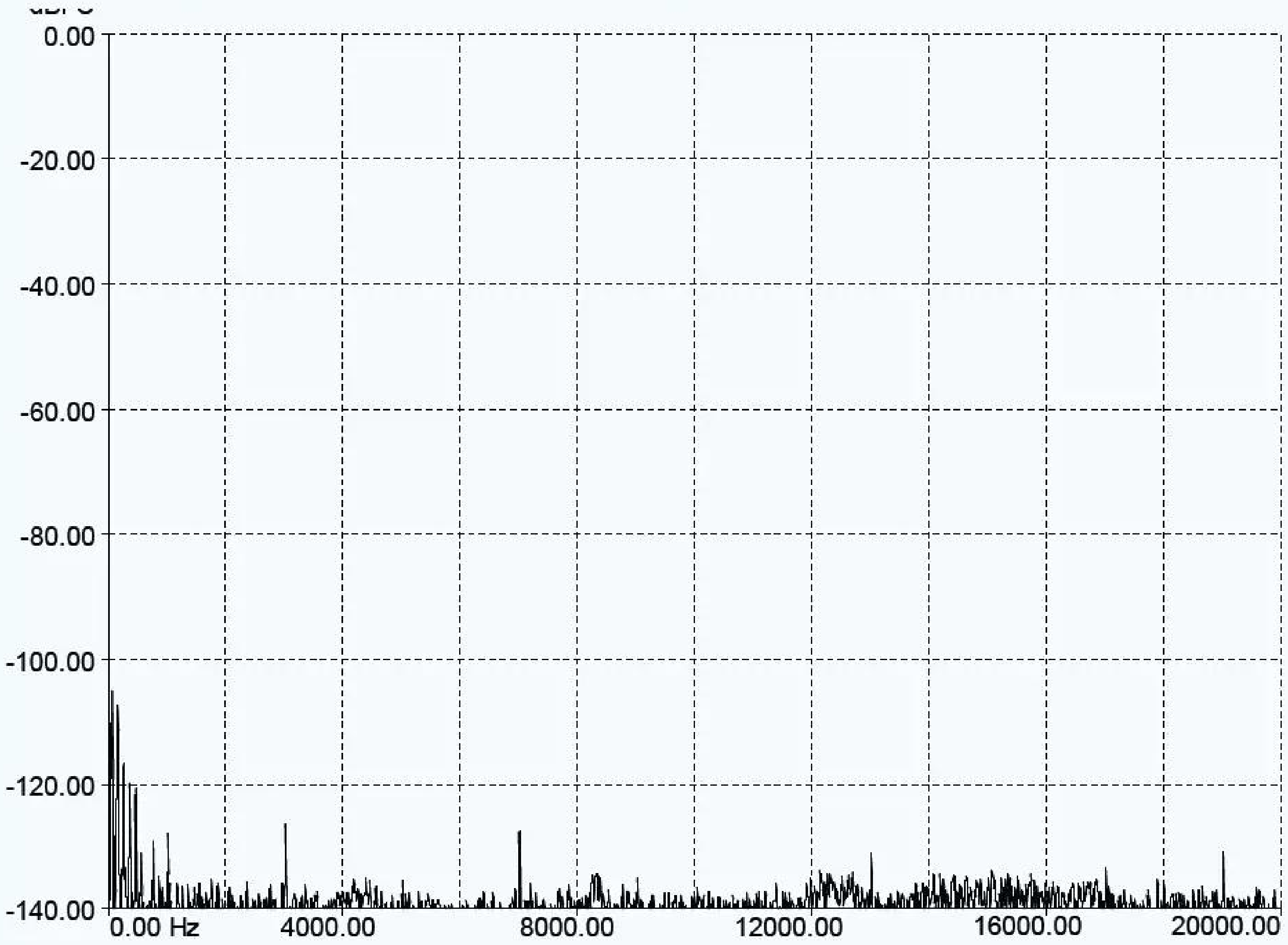
Newport Test Labs repeated the distortion measurements using a much higher power output (20-watts), the results of which are shown in Graphs 4, 5 and 6. You can see that once again, distortion into 4-ohm loads is basically unaffected by the position of the impedance switch, but you can also see that distortion is lower into



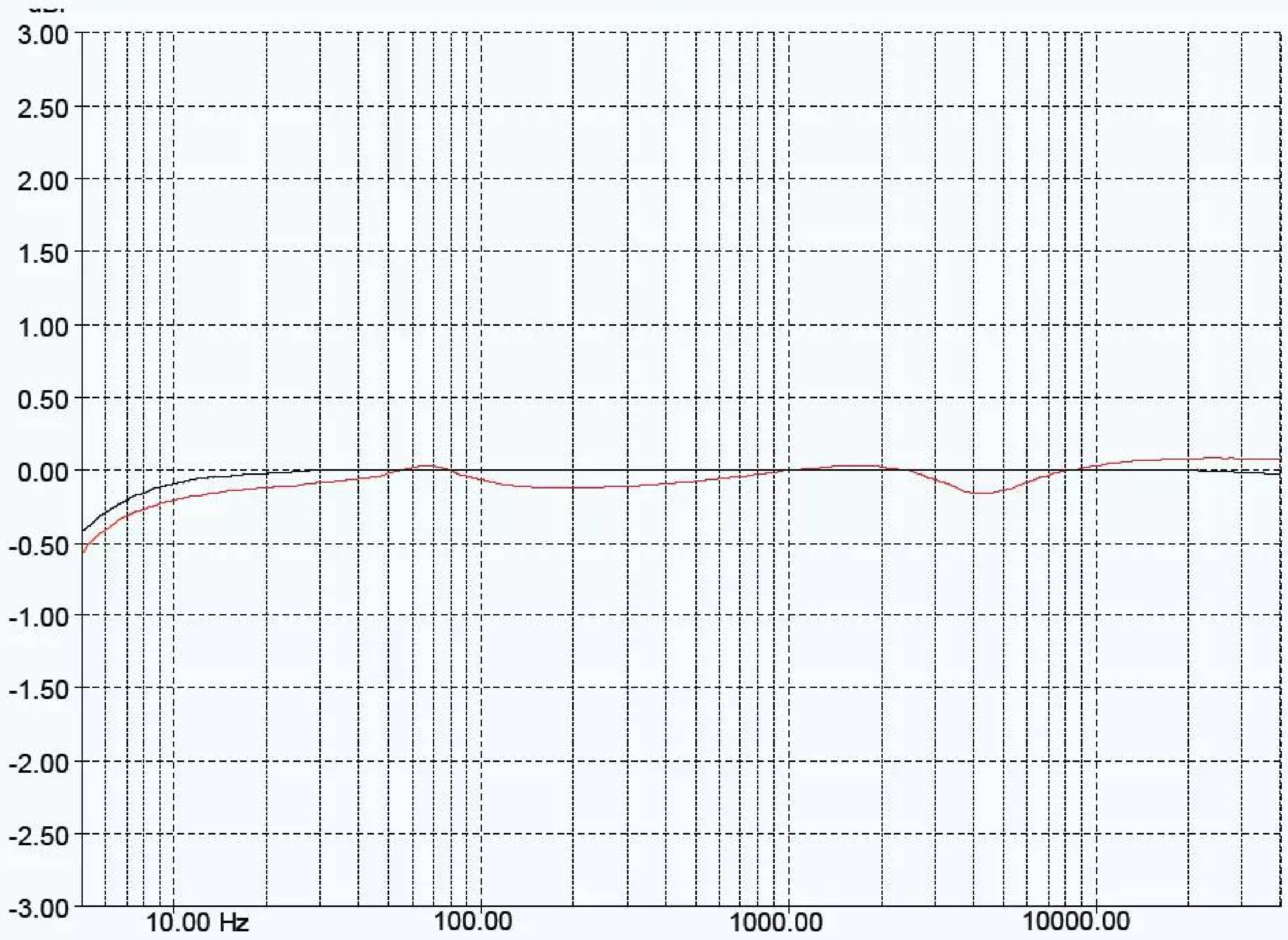
Graph 7. IMD (CCIF: 19k and 20k at 1:1) at 1-watt into 8-ohms. (Load switch set to 8 ohms.)



Graph 8. IMD (CCIF: 19k+20k at 1:1) at 20-watts into 8-ohms. (Load switch set to 8 ohms.)



Graph 9. Noise floor re 1-watt output into 8-ohms. (Load switch set to 8 ohms.)



Graph 10. Frequency resp into 8-ohm load (black) and simulated speaker load (red).

the 8-ohm load than into the 4-ohm load. Into 8-ohms, there's a second harmonic component at –72dB (0.0251%) with all other components being more than 80dB down (0.01%). Into 4-ohms, the second harmonic is at –66dB (0.05%) and the other higher-order harmonics are between –70dB (0.031%) and –80dB (0.01%) down out to 15kHz.

All of these measurements tie in well with Wattson Audio's specification of 0.05% THD+N and almost perfectly with *Newport Test Labs'* overall measurement of 0.058% THD+N.

The overall signal-to-noise ratios measured by *Newport Test Labs* for the Wattson Audio Madison power amplifier were excellent, despite falling a little short of reaching the 120dB specification claimed by Wattson Audio. Referenced to an output of one watt, *Newport Test Labs* measured results of 92dB unweighted and 99dB A-weighted, whilst referenced to rated output the S/N results were 110dB unweighted and 116dB A-weighted. The noise spectrum referenced to an output of one watt is shown in Graph 9, and you can see some low-frequency (no doubt mains-related) noise at the left of the graph, but above 500Hz, all other noise is more than 120dB down.

"This is a design that will be able to drive any pair of properly-designed loudspeakers."

Intermodulation distortion (CCIF-IMD) was very low, as you can see from Graph 7 and Graph 8. At an output of one-watt (Graph 7) sidebands were close to or more than 90dB down (0.0031%), and although there was a regenerated difference signal down at 1kHz, it was sitting at –85dB (0.0056%). At an output of 20-watts (Graph 8) there are only four high-frequency sidebands and the regenerated difference signal plus a single harmonic. Note that the noise floor in both graphs is more than 100dB down.

Square wave performance was exemplary, as you'd expect from the extended bandwidth demonstrated in the frequency response tests. The 100Hz square wave shows just the slightest of tilts, indicating a non-dc low-frequency extension, but no bending, which would otherwise indicate phase shift, while the 1kHz square wave looks like it came direct from the signal generator. The same could almost be said of the 10kHz square wave response — it is exceptionally good, exhibiting a particularly fast rise-time. The slight overshoot suggests a slight lift in the very high-frequency response, but this is only of academic interest… it would have no effect on audio performance. Connecting a highly reactive and capacitative load didn't bother the Madison at all, with it delivering just a ¼-height overshoot that was immediately damped. This is a design that will be able to drive any pair of properly-designed loudspeakers. **Steve Holding**

australian

hi-fi

Show SYDNEY 2026

SAVE THE DATE

1-3 MAY 2026

AT THE SYDNEY CENTRAL HOTEL

MANAGED BY ASCOTT

BROUGHT TO YOU BY WHAT HI-FI? australian hi-fi SOUND IMAGE

VAF Research DC-2S

Bookshelf Speakers

+
- Impeccable build quality
- Excellent stereo imaging

−
- Fussy with partnering equipment
- Not the cleanest front panel

RRP **$1,699**

When the time comes to upgrade your system's speakers — or build your first system — it might be tempting to seek out a bespoke, handmade pair for the extra quality they can offer over mass-produced alternatives. Doing so, however, usually costs more — you know, the 'do I really need two kidneys?' kind of more. That is, unless you turn your attention to Australian loudspeaker brand VAF Research, which has been meticulously hand-crafting its models on a made-to-order basis for nearly 50 years, without the wince-inducing price.

This considered approach has earned VAF fans around the world, not only for its attention to detail, but because the resulting products are, in a word, superb.

What's particularly impressive about this Adelaide-based outfit is that every range receives the same dedicated design and manufacturing care — from the $24,999 Signature i93 MKV (reviewed in *Australian Hi-Fi* issue #538) to the far more affordable DC-2S on test here at $1,699.

Within VAF's lineup, the DC series is positioned as the 'greatest bang for buck performance,' a claim that dates back to the DC-X floorstanders that launched the range in 1997 for just under $4,000. Adjusted for today, that's roughly $8,000, yet the current sixth-generation DC-X lists at $4,499 — underscoring the value brief that defines the series.

Set against that legacy, the new DC-2S — arriving 28 years after the inaugural DC-X — is, in VAF's words, 'the best performing VAF DC range bookshelf speaker in our storied history.'

DESIGN AND BUILD

As mentioned, all VAF Research speakers are made to order in the company's Adelaide facility, and the DC-2S is no different. Lift them from the box and the meticulous craftsmanship is immediately obvious — they're impeccable. The timber enclosure, built in South Australia, feels especially solid, thanks in part to its 30mm-thick front baffle. There are four stained finishes available: Natural Oak, Black Oak, Jarrah-coloured Oak, and Brown Oak. Interestingly, cycling through colour options on VAF's website doesn't change the product images, nor is there a clear depiction of which finish is which. As such, if the DC-2S sounds appealing, I'd strongly recommend visiting your nearest dealer to see the finishes in person. A removable black cloth grille is supplied, although it attaches to the front panel using pins, rather than magnets. When it's removed, four mounting holes are clearly visible, which may deter some buyers who prefer a more minimalist design.

This is a two-way bass reflex standmount design using a 130mm natural-fibre cone bass-mid driver supplied by SB Acoustics, and a Peerless XT25 dual-concentric diaphragm tweeter with a specialised central phase plug. VAF says it chose this tweeter for its "excellent on- and off-axis performance" and wider room dispersion. The tweeter is slightly inset to improve time alignment with the bass-mid driver. The bass-mid uses a vented alloy chassis to increase rigidity and reduce resonances; venting also helps relieve internal air pressure, which can lower distortion. A front-facing bass reflex port makes the DC-2S more forgiving with placement, but it should be particularly attractive to those with small to medium-sized rooms. And in my room they certainly made an impression, as you'll find out in the 'Listening Sessions' section shortly.

The Adelaide work extends to VAF's own hand-wound pure-copper inductors in the crossovers here – the handover point being 3 kHz, and the frequency range of the DC-2S is stated at 50Hz ~ 21kHz ±3dB, which promises solid bass reach for a mid-sized standmount, along with clean highs.

With sensitivity of 86dB and 4 ohms nominal impedance, you might think some solid amplifier power would be required to bring out their best. But on VAF's own website, the company recommends two compact half-width amplifiers as pairings — the Rega iO and Brio MK7 — and also my own current reference amplifier, the Marantz Model 60n. The 60n delivers 80W into 4 ohms, giving it sufficient headroom but not unlimited power. Yet this easily proved enough to have the DC-2S on song.

LISTENING SESSIONS

With the VAFs hooked up to the Marantz amp, I carried out the bulk of my listening via Qobuz Connect, made available via a recent firmware update.

To kick things off, I was inspired by the list of Massive Attack test tracks that we published in the previous issue of *Australian Hi-Fi*. I began with a familiar but forgotten favourite, 'Safe From Harm', and was immediately taken aback by the rendition. It was as if the band was right there in front of me in my listening room. VAF boasts the stereo imaging of the DC-2S is "ridiculously good" and I have to agree. Shara Nelson's vocal is a real highlight here, but the pulsating bassline provides the necessary support, and the DC-2S are able to go low when asked, much lower than I expected from a speaker of their size. While I might have been sold on the merits of 2.1 channels following my review of the Paradigm Defiance S12 subwoofer in *Australian Hi-Fi* #542, listening to the DC-2S made me reconsider. If you appreciate a good helping of bass, I would recommend first listening to the VAF speakers without a subwoofer connected; I think you'll be pleasantly surprised by what they're capable of.

Switch to 'Unfinished Sympathy' and

vocalist Shara Nelson's voice comes through with exceptional levels of emotion. In fact, I noticed throughout the entirety of my testing that the DC-2S handles vocals particularly well. They shine through the mix, taking centre stage.

They're in their element with more upbeat tracks too, such as Miley Cyrus' 'Walk of Fame' from her most recent album, *Something Beautiful*. It's a true onslaught of a dance track, featuring an extensive lineup of supporting musicians, including Danielle Haim of the band Haim on electric guitar. Once the Bronski Beat-inspired intro vocal gives way to the underlying synth beat provided by a Roland TB-303, the DC-2S are more than happy to deliver the energy required. Miley's vocals come through loud and clear once again, but what struck me most was how the DC-2S turned their modest looks into an unexpectedly lively, party-starting performance.

The DC-2S can also be delicate and poised, as shown when playing London Grammar's 'Stay Awake' from *If You Wait*, where they reveal fine detail. The opening guitar strings come through clearly and fill the room, with the openness and airiness that give them an intimate feel.

> "...the DC-2S turned their modest looks into an unexpectedly lively, party-starting performance."

Where I feel the DC-2S excel in particular is with soundtracks. I recently rewatched the 2015 Award-winning documentary *Amy*, based on the life of Amy Winehouse. It never fails to make me feel emotional, not only for the struggles the iconic English singer-songwriter faced, but for its soundtrack. The closing track, 'Amy Forever', is the one that really hits me in the feels. Listening through the DC-2S was the most emotive performance I've yet heard. The opening piano notes pierce through with just the right amount of bite. When the violins and other stringed instruments come in, it's once again a wonderfully delicate performance by the VAF speakers. This introduction of more instruments at around the one minute mark also increases the volume, and the DC-2S take it in their stride, expressing lovely dynamics.

Switching to 'Like a Dog Chasing Cars' from *The Dark Knight* soundtrack, reveals a wonderfully cinematic presentation. The rumbling bass drums are low and controlled and the dynamic shifts of the piece are handled with expertise. One thing I did notice when listening to this particular track is that I would've liked the violins to have a little more shine. They're not muddied in any sense of the word, although listening to the same piece via the KEF LS50 Metaspeakers does reveal an extra nuance that allows the violins to extend beyond the rest of the mix.

CONCLUSION

If you're looking for a pair of bookshelf speakers under $2,000, the VAF Research DC-2S absolutely deserves an audition. They're beautifully made speakers and the level of care and dedication that has gone into their production is apparent from the get go. They sound terrific — provided you choose the right partnering equipment — and will keep you engaged for years to come. **Max Langridge**

SPECS & CONTACT

RRP: $1,699
Warranty: Three years (free extension to 10 years upon registration)
Frequency range: 45Hz ~ 23kHz
Frequency response: 50Hz ~ 21kHz +/-3dB
Impedance: 4 ohms (nominal)
Sensitivity: 86dB
Recommend amp power: up to 100W/ch
Dimensions (HWD): 35 x 18 x 24.5cm
Weight: 5.75kg each

Contact: VAF Research
T: (08) 8363 9996
E: vaf@vaf.com.au
W: www.vaf.com.au

Beyerdynamic Aventho 100

Headphones

+
- Solid sound, great build
- Bluetooth, cable and USB-C playback
- Good app options and controls
- Safe for your hair!

−
- Bass needs taming

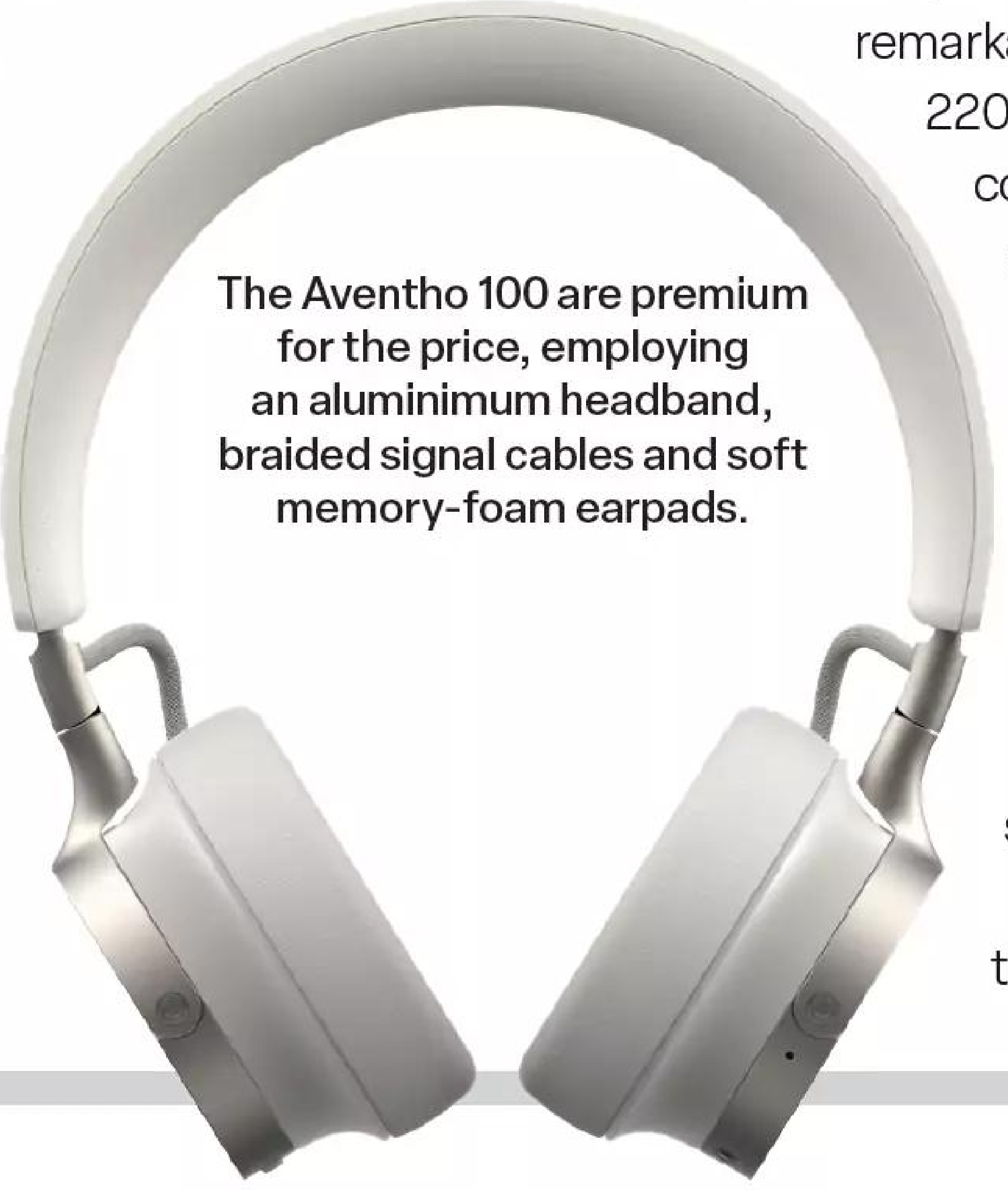
RRP **$349**

Beyerdynamic has a well-priced new pair of wireless noise-cancellers for its Aventho range: the Aventho 100 at $349. These are closed on-ear designs, as opposed to over-ear designs (the over-ear Aventho 300s are currently selling at $584), although on-ears are relatively rare in the commute-and-travel noise-cancelling market. This may be because some consider over-ears to be better able to form a reliable seal around the ears, something essential to effective noise cancelling. But the best on-ears can do the job well, and they have a particular bonus for some people — because they don't mess up your hair.

NEW CANS, NEW OWNERS

These are interesting times at Beyerdynamic, family-owned ever since it was founded in 1924, but now moving to Chinese ownership under manufacturer Cosonic. While not known as a brand in itself, Cosonic has been making headphones since 2013 for other brands; such things are often deliberately opaque, but industry reports would indicate past work for Philips, JBL and Beats, to name a few. Beyerdynamic is, of course, famous for making its headphones in Germany — and that will not change, I am assured. But it already manufactures some of its more entry-level consumer products in China, such as gaming headsets and newer wireless models (including this pair), which led to the approach and reportedly an un-refusable offer from Cosonic.

According to Beyerdynamic's CEO, Andreas Rapp, the deal is expected to complete before the end of the year, and will enable Beyerdynamic to invest in its future. He promised that nothing would change for employees, with all contracts remaining valid, and the firm continuing to operate as an independent company.

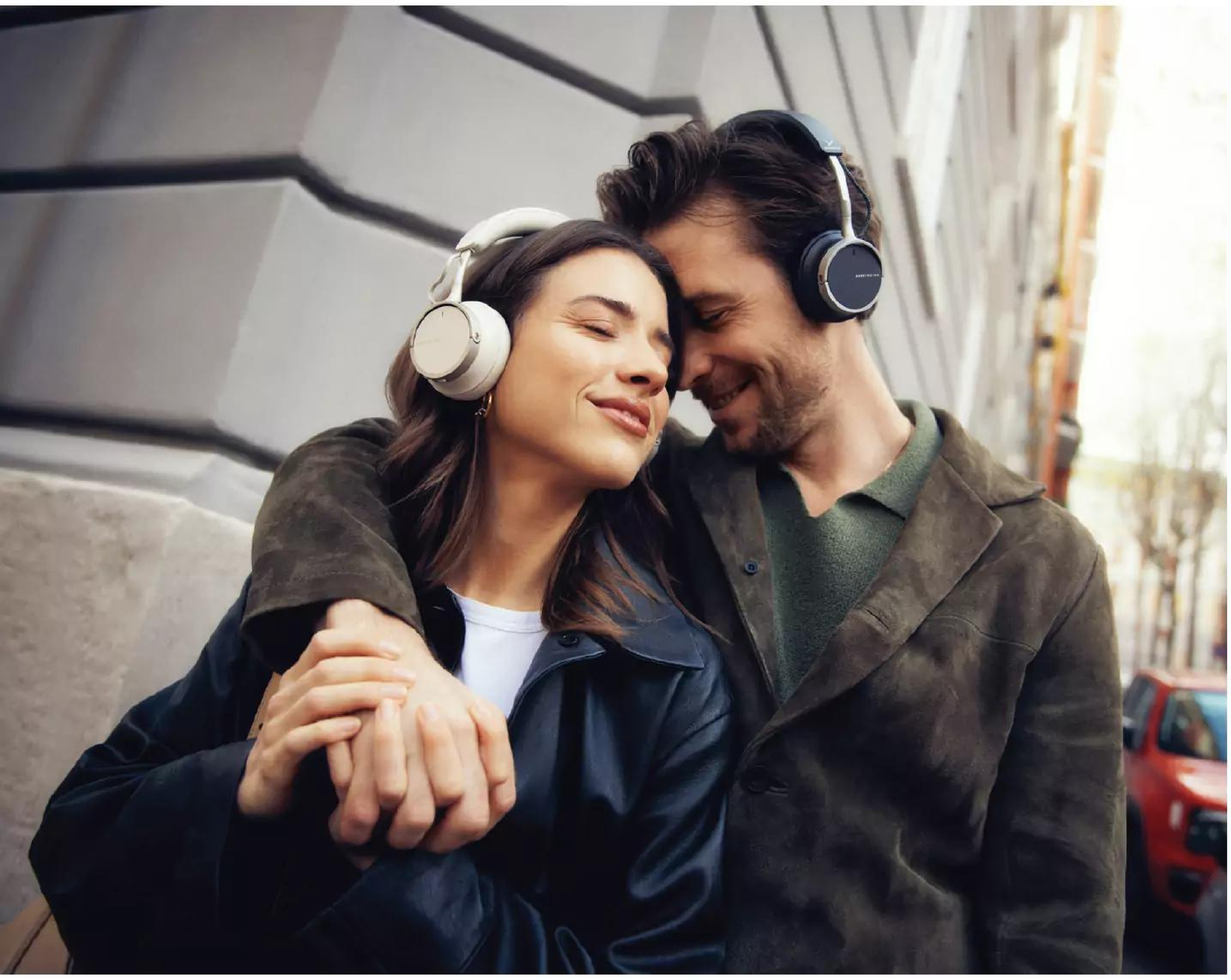


The Aventho 100 are premium for the price, employing an aluminimum headband, braided signal cables and soft memory-foam earpads.

DESIGN & FEATURES

If these Aventhos are a sign of the company's future, then there seems nothing to worry about; they're a solid pair of cans with very sensibly thought-out features. Construction is pretty premium for the price: a super-solid extendable aluminium headband down to the yoke and cup support, with impressive braided signal cables looping up into the padded headband. All this combines with light moulded headshells and soft memory-foam earpads to create a design of remarkable low weight (just 220 grams) and excellent comfort. The earpads are covered in what is presumably some sort of artificial leather, and they twist to come off very easily, making any future replacement a simple task.

In comfort terms there's some inward



pressure to ensure that all-important seal onto your ears, but it's not fatiguing, even after several hours of playback. The pivoting headshells mean that when you drop them around your neck they can sit either flat or facing inwards, whichever you find more comfortable, and while there's only a soft bag and not a hard case provided, they take up so little space in carry-on that you can just slide them somewhere with reasonable protection — I reckon they're quite robust enough to travel that way.

The company describes their look as bringing "timeless style to today's listeners", and there is a little classic retro feel to the overall design: the metallic rings around the earcups gives them a direct design connection to the very first Beyerdynamic headphones, the DT 48, launched in 1937! Those were all black, like my review pair of Aventho 100s, but the brown option for the Aventhos look even more retro, while the white versions look more modern. Take your pick!

> "...with this EQ dialled in, and ANC off, I went from demo track to demo track simply enjoying the music."

These are closed-back cans, of course, and they use a set of 45mm dynamic drivers, which appear to be the same STELLAR.45 drivers used by the company in its PRO X series, including the award-winning DT 700 PRO X and DT 900 PRO X headphones. The driver's high efficiency is achieved through an N52 neodymium-iron-boron (NdFeB) magnet, with a tiny 0.6mm-wide magnetic gap that helps create a full Tesla or more of field strength to control the three-layer diaphragm and the voice coil centred in the gap. Beyerdynamic boasts that its voice coil is longer but lighter than most competitors, all in the search for precision and control.

There's also software control of your headphones thanks to the 'beyerdynamic' app, which connected quickly to the Aventho 100s, showing battery life and gifting access to various options — EQ, ANC selection, how long (or whether) to leave before auto-shutdown (30 minutes by default), whether you want voice prompts, and whether they should be in English or German; you can even keep desirable specific voice prompts while removing others.

The app also alerts you if a software update becomes available, which it did during my review; it took about five minutes to install.

The hardware controls on the headphones themselves are pleasingly button-based; I groan whenever I review headphones which require me to become accustomed to arcane swipes and pinches of their outer surfaces. I much prefer buttons, especially when implemented in the usual manner, and there are no surprises here. A power button turns them on; keep holding this to start pairing. There's a three-button rocker for all the usual things: volume up/down, play/pause, double-tap next track, triple-tap last track. When you hit maximum volume there's a little squeak to let you know, though you'd probably notice anyway.

At least, those are the defaults for your taps; you can change them in the app if you want.

Where's the noise-cancelling button? You just short-tap the power button to cycle through ANC on, Transparency on, or ANC off. Those are your options, each announced by a nice English lady as you shuttle through them.

Voice calls are powered by Qualcomm's cVc (Clear Voice Cancellation) technology; you can tell there's Qualcomm inside here, because there's support for the aptX Lossless Bluetooth codec, one of the best Bluetooth codecs available, though restricted to Qualcomm-chipped headphones, and even then working only with phones that also have a Qualcomm Snapdragon chip inside. If you have one of those, then aptX Lossless really can achieve lossless CD-quality transmission over Bluetooth if given a quiet enough wireless environment. Otherwise it'll switch to aptX Adaptive if your phone supports that; Adaptive operates down below 420kbps, which may be all you can maintain in a real-world environment. Having these onboard usually means compatibility with classic aptX and aptX HD as well, should one of those be all that your phone supports.

There's also the basic SBC Bluetooth codec, and above that the AAC codec, which will be the fallback for Apple users.

Battery life is wildly impressive: up to 60 hours of listening without ANC and up to 40 hours with it; you shouldn't need to recharge even during a long haul with hours spent on the floor of an airport lounge between connections. And if you do run low, a very speedy fast-charge function will add up to 15 hours of playtime from just a 15-minute charge.

LISTENING SESSIONS

Here's something I've never heard before: when I started streaming from my MacBook, the little lady-voice in the headphones announced “AAC active”, and ‘Multipoint’ too — thus informing me which codec was actually reaching the headphones, plus the fact that my phone had connected so I could use the Beyerdynamic app if I wanted (even when playing from the MacBook). This is great, given the chosen codec is something users have no control over (other than selecting ‘low latency’ in the app, which may drop you to a lower quality); it’s the processor in the sending device, whether Apple or Android, Snapdragon or otherwise, which picks the codec and bit-rate. You’d never normally know, so this is a nice bonus for tech-heads.

With the AAC codec and noise-cancelling engaged, the Aventhos’ sound was immediately impressive and enjoyable: rich, clear and very much in-your-head, perhaps partly from the on-ear sound being more direct than you get from the large chambers of over-ear headphones — here the sound is halfway to the more direct feel of in-ears, but with the comfort of a proper padded headphone.

Playing ‘Banksia’, a joyful piece of work by Alex The Astronaut, the Aventhos delivered first the initially intimate acoustic of guitar and vocal, then had sufficient headroom to expand easily to the bass and supporting guitars, then opening up wide to the full spread of harmonies across the soundstage on the chorus, with not a hint of the drivers compressing to do so — an excellent indication of their control, that Tesla of magnetic flux in full command.

This unflappable command of the music proved a key characteristic as I wandered through genres, though there was another less desirable commonality to most songs: rather too much bass; the Aventhos would push basslines into bloat that could start muddying the lower mids as well.

There is EQ available, but if you do like your bass, there’s a quicker short-cut: just turn the ANC off. This tightens the bass in timing without reducing its level. On a song like Crowded House’s ‘Say That Again’, this converted a dominant background rumble into a less destructively full bass sound.

If still too much, and it was for me, try the app’s EQ, where I noted that ‘Neutral’ invokes a significant bass cut, so someone at Beyerdynamic obviously agrees with me! This returned the balance to a much more musical delivery, removing the ‘street’-style bloat. The ‘Neutral’ setting also had a top cut, however, and I didn’t want that, so I edited the setting and saved it as ‘My EQ’. In fact I noted that the slider marked 62Hz was too low to affect much anyway, so I left it up: the 125Hz slider was the one to use to notch out the bloat. Doing so doesn’t notch out the bass itself — spin something like *Nachtwald*’s ‘Snake Oil’ and your head will be fully humming! But the beats come faster and tighter with the bloat dialled out. Indeed with this EQ dialled in, and ANC off, I went from demo track to demo track simply enjoying the music, and often finding myself at the very top of the available volume range for my possibly above-average preferred levels of listening.

How punchy and widespread the guitars and horns on Sheryl Crow’s *100 Miles From Memphis* album, and a perfectly-portrayed vocal whether solo or loaded with BVs. Wet Leg’s ‘catch these fists’ was a great one for adjusting that bass — the bass pedal here never lets up, continuing solo on the bridges but boosted by multiple bass elements elsewhere, which can send some systems into an overloaded mess on the choruses. The Aventhos stayed just the right side of intense.

I had noted that Beyer’s FAQs for the product say you can keep using it while charging over USB-C. That turns out to be an understatement; you can indeed keep Bluetoothing as you charge via USB-C, but there’s more. When I plugged the Aventhos into my MacBook this way, they appeared as an endpoint in themselves; I could turn off Bluetooth and send the audio straight down USB-C. Regular readers will not be surprised to find that this raised their performance a level above any other connection, because Bluetooth remains a limitation on quality even in these days of maybe-lossless codecs.

No sign of that bass push at all now. And I was amazed to find that I could still use the Beyerdynamic app on my iPhone to tweak EQ and other variables, even while listening via USB-C. It’s an excellent implementation for those seeking a quality boost when at home or using a laptop.

There’s also a cable in the box, for good old analogue listening. This can be done power off or power on, but the balance was particularly weird when used with the power off (though the volume was high), so perhaps use the controlling benefits of the power circuit if you have juice available. Cabled sound was again a level of clarity above that of Bluetooth, and with power on, you retain the ability to tweak via the app.

The ANC itself is effective, perhaps not class-leading, but anything more would be a clever trick from on-ear headphones (overears can have the advantage of a microphone inside the earcup); it does what you need on a commute and will amaze you when donned in a throbbing aircraft.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately on-ear sonic performance is a little different, because of that more direct path to your earholes: there’s an intensity that can feel a little less relaxing, a little less spacious, but perhaps gaining involvement and excitement in the process. Different, then, but no less hi-fi — the Aventho 100 manage to weave delicacy of detail and impressive soundstaging together with a powerful bass, indeed one that needs restraining at times, while offering high-end Bluetooth codecs and the luxury of USB-C listening when available.

Meanwhile the price puts them in very attractive territory — especially for those with big hair. **Jez Ford**

SPECS & CONTACT

Type: Dynamic, closed, on-ear, Bluetooth, ANC
Driver: 45mm STELLAR.45
Quoted frequency response: 20Hz– 20kHz
Quoted battery life: 60 hours no ANC, 40 hours with ANC
Inputs: Minijack cable, USB-C cable, Bluetooth 5.4 (SBC, AAC, aptX Adaptive, aptX Lossless)
Weight: 220g

Contact: Synchronised Technology Pty Ltd
Telephone: 1300 467 968
Web: beyerdynamic.com.au

Ruark Audio R610 & Sabre-R

Streaming Amplifier & Bookshelf Speakers

Streaming amplifiers are always a compromise. They have to combine amplification, DAC, preamp, multiple wireless streaming protocols and support for dozens of different music apps – all in one box. To make all these elements work seamlessly and deliver a great sound is a hard task.

Ruark Audio, however, has decades of experience in combining multiple functions in one box, to great success.

From powered desktop speakers with Bluetooth — such as the MR1 Mk3 featured in issue #542 — smart radios with streaming features (R2 Mk4) and all-in-one music systems (R410) – the British company has already proven it can juggle multiple features while delivering great sound, stylish design and ease of use.

The Ruark Audio R610 streaming amplifier, then, should be a walk in the park, shouldn't it?

R610 STREAMING AMPLIFIER

Unusually for a Ruark product, the R610 doesn't include any speaker elements. It's all electronics. Inside, it features Class D amplification with 75 watts of power per channel, and a Burr Brown DAC that supports high-resolution FLAC, AIFF, ALAC and WAV files up to 32-bit/384kHz. Ruark says the R610 has a frequency response of 22Hz to 22kHz +-/-3dB.

High-quality components are used, as well as a switch mode power supply that promises to deliver efficient and optimised power to the system. Alongside its streaming smarts (more on those in a bit) it also sports a moving magnet phono stage, positioning the R610 as a one-box system for all your music needs.

What's not unusual for a Ruark product, is the fact the R610 looks stunning. A classy design with a high standard of build quality, this "music console" (as Ruark calls it) wouldn't look out of place in any interior.

The handcrafted slatted wood grilles and metal details on the front – also seen in fellow R100 series products, including the matching Sabre-R speakers (a review of which follows) – are elegant, and the whole unit is beautifully made.

The large, five-inch, full colour TFT touchscreen is gorgeous to behold – clear, informative, easy to read and use, with good contrast for displaying album covers.

It's not a touchscreen interface, but it gives the R610 that harmonious balance of modern and retro aesthetics in either of its two finish options — Fused Walnut veneer or Satin Charcoal lacquer.

The compact footprint — 300mm wide, 280mm deep and 107mm tall including the top-mounted RotoDial — is also appealing, as is its 4.1kg weight, making it easy to move into place. Coupled with the Sabre-R speakers that you can buy as a bundle (and occasionally save some cash compared to buying individually), it is well-suited to smaller spaces.

+ **R610**
- Engaging, dynamic sound
- Ample streaming features and connectivity
- Gorgeous design

Sabre-R
- Excellent midrange quality
- Agile, fluid presentation
- Great integration between drivers

! **R610**
- No dedicated app

Sabre-R
- Bass is soft and doesn't go too deep

> “...this “music console” (as Ruark calls it) wouldn’t look out of place in any interior.”

The R610 is topped off with Ruark’s iconic RotoDial controller, a design which is also mimicked in the separate remote control you get in the box. This identical handheld remote fits particularly neatly into the palm of your hand and is a well-designed, tactile way to use the R610.

Even better, it connects to the main unit via Bluetooth, not infrared, meaning you don’t need to have a direct line of sight to control it.

It takes a while to get used to all the icons and what each button does, but once you familiarise yourself with all the functions, it’s all plain sailing.

The buttons are swift and work smoothly, and the circular dial makes it very intuitive to scroll through all the sources and menu options.

Another great touch from Ruark is that a pair of 3m oxygen-free copper speaker cables are included in the box. This is unusual but wholly welcome — it’s not often I see such premium-looking speaker cables included with a product.

It makes setting up your system — especially if this is your first hi-fi set-up and you aren’t au fait with traditional separates — quicker and easier as you don’t have to shop separately for speaker cables (which can start to get expensive).

The cables are nicely braided, are terminated with banana plugs and work well. This does also offer a good upgrade path as the R610’s performance did improve when I swapped them for a step-up set of speaker cables.

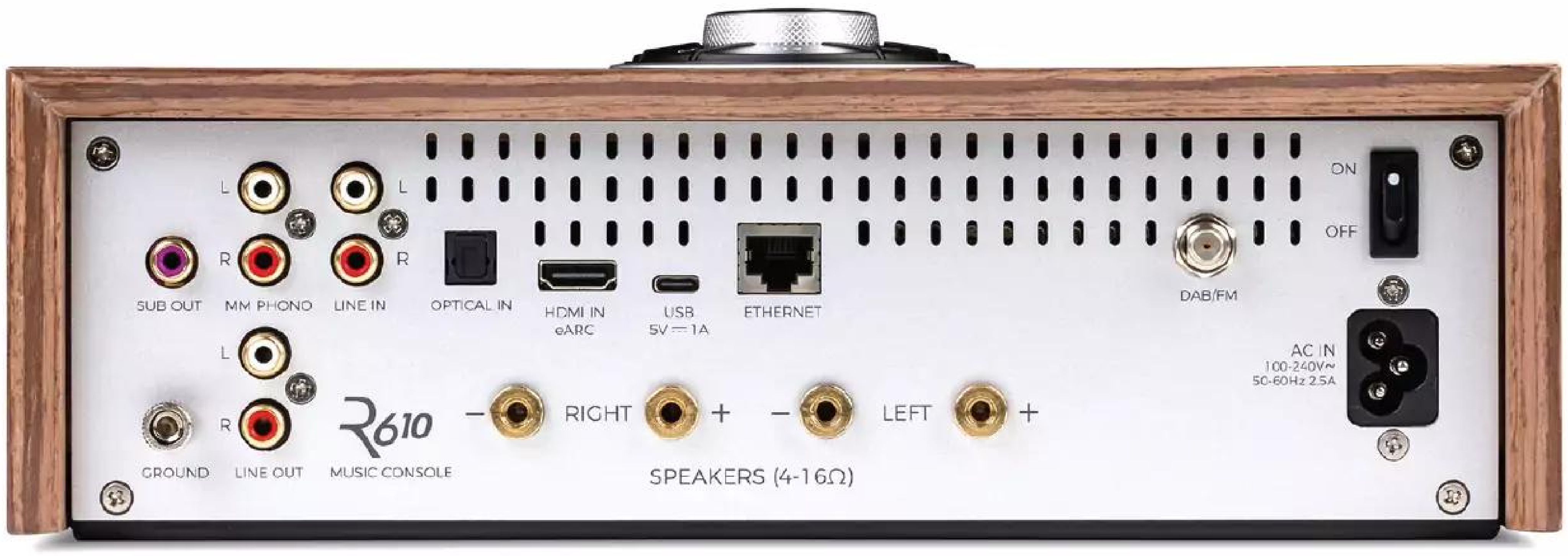
So, other than the aforementioned moving magnet phono input, how else can you get music to play from the R610? In quite a lot of ways, it turns out, as Ruark has gone down the kitchen sink route for the R610 streaming amplifier — it’s bursting at the seams with features! In terms of wireless streaming, all the popular protocols and latest apps are supported, including Qobuz, Tidal and Spotify in their Connect guises, along with support for Amazon Music and Deezer.

You can also opt to stream from your smart device using AirPlay 2, Chromecast or Bluetooth 5.1 with aptX HD support, while DLNA and UPnP compatibility means you’ll be able to play through your digital music collection stored on media servers or NAS devices on the same network. Wi-fi and Ethernet are both available, and both proved stable throughout my listening sessions.

Ruark found its footing in radios, so it’s pleasing to find the Ruark R610 wears that heritage proudly, with FM and DAB+ radio tuners included alongside the usual internet radio stations. You can save up to 20 presets on the R610, making your favourite playlists and stations easier to access.

Surprisingly, for a streaming amplifier, there’s no dedicated app to control playback. Fortunately, the Ruark R610 is perfectly usable without one. If using Qobuz, Tidal or Apple Music, the native app serves as your natural playback controller, while the R610 auto-senses if you want to stream via the Connect mode or AirPlay, for instance.

It’s when dealing with large music libraries that a tablet or smartphone interface feels necessary, so I’d



The R610 supports a range of music streaming services and digital radio stations, alongside a good selection of physical connections.

Ruark hasn't developed a dedicated app for the R610, but third-party options are available. A supplied remote control is a fine alternative.

recommend seeking out a third-party app, such as MConnect Player, which can be found on both Apple and Google app stores.

The R610 also isn't laden with myriad settings and customisation options, as offered by similar streaming platforms such as BluOS or WiiM — so there isn't much need for an app, really.

The R610's menu settings are simple and offer straightforward options that are easy to select with the physical control buttons.

A few new features arrived via a firmware update in October, including the ability to hide sources that you don't use, alarm clock functionality, and support for Bluetooth headphones playback.

It's not just streaming talents the R610 lays claim to, there are plenty of physical connections too. There is a rather good moving magnet phono stage for your turntable, an HDMI ARC input for connecting to TVs, along with digital optical (up to 24-bit/96khz) and RCA analogue inputs.

There is also a UBC-C input that supports audio playback, and which can also be used to connect Ruark's dedicated R-CD100 CD drive, giving you another medium through which to play music. I didn't have the R-CD100 for this review, but I was able to connect my Cyrus CDi CD player with both analogue and optical inputs, and a Rega Planar 3 RS Edition turntable was connected to the phono input to test its quality. Finally, if you want some extra low-end oomph from your R610, you can connect a subwoofer via a mono RCA connector.

One thing worth mentioning is that I didn't get any sound at first from either of the two analogue inputs. Performing a factory reset fixed the problem and I didn't encounter any further issues during the review process.

SABRE-R SPEAKERS

While you're free to pair the R610 with any compatible speakers you wish, Ruark Audio would love to point you in the direction of its Sabre-R speakers, which have been tuned to match the R610. The Essex-based brand launched its first passive speaker — the Sabre — in the mid-1980s and it's been 20 years since the company last made a pair. I was therefore keen to find out if Ruark's re-entry to the passive speaker market is a success.

At $1,499 per pair, the Sabre-R isn't short of competition, including the Bowers & Wilkins 606 S3, which I also used for the purposes of this review. You can read what I thought of each pairing in the listening sessions section.

The Sabre-R speakers are smart-looking speakers, and nicely made. From the cabinet to the fabric grilles, the overall fit and finish is neat, of good quality and well designed.

I particularly like the detail of the wooden slats on the front of the speaker, which not only matches the R610 perfectly, but makes them great to look at if you pair with your own amplifier. It's an understated but elegant effect in my review sample's charcoal (black) lacquer finish; there is a walnut veneer finish if you prefer to lean into the all-wood effect. Both finishes perfectly match the same options for the R610. The speakers are on the compact side, measuring 290 x 175 x 215mm, making them ideally suited to smaller and medium-sized rooms.

While I suspect most buyers will pair the Sabre-R with the R610, they can of course stand on their own as well.

They're a two-way design, with a 26mm silk-dome tweeter and 15cm mid/bass long-throw driver that has a treated paper cone. Both drivers have been designed in-house. They're rated at 6 Ohms, have a claimed frequency response of 50Hz - 20kHz and a sensitivity rating of 86dB. Ruark recommends you pair them with an amplifier capable of delivering 25 – 100W of power.

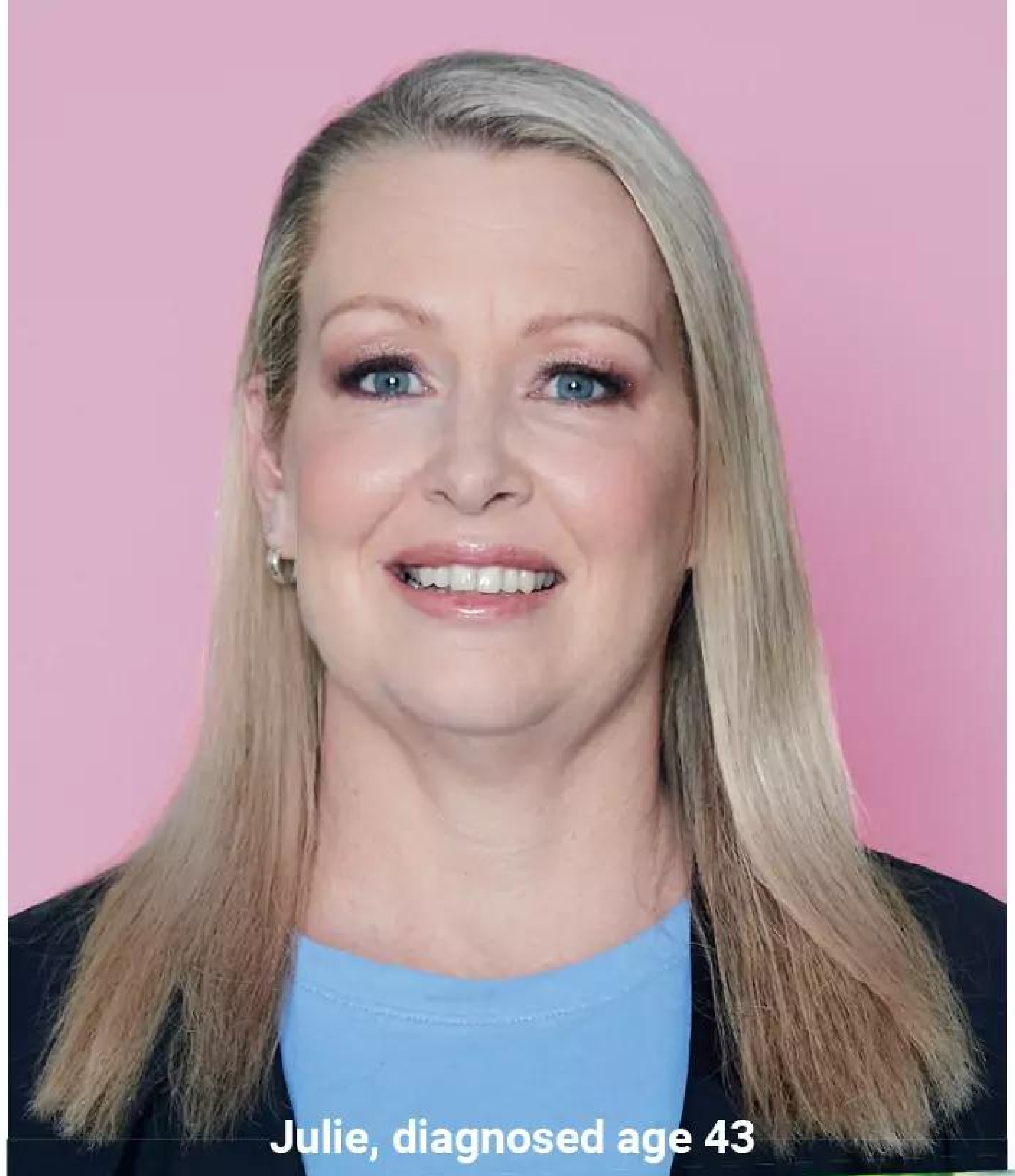
You'll find a two-way reflex port at the rear of the speakers, along with gold plated bi-wire speaker terminals.

The cabinet is braced and damped, and Ruark says it has spent hours carefully tuning the cabinet to the drivers, as well as the crossovers inside to ensure the best performance.

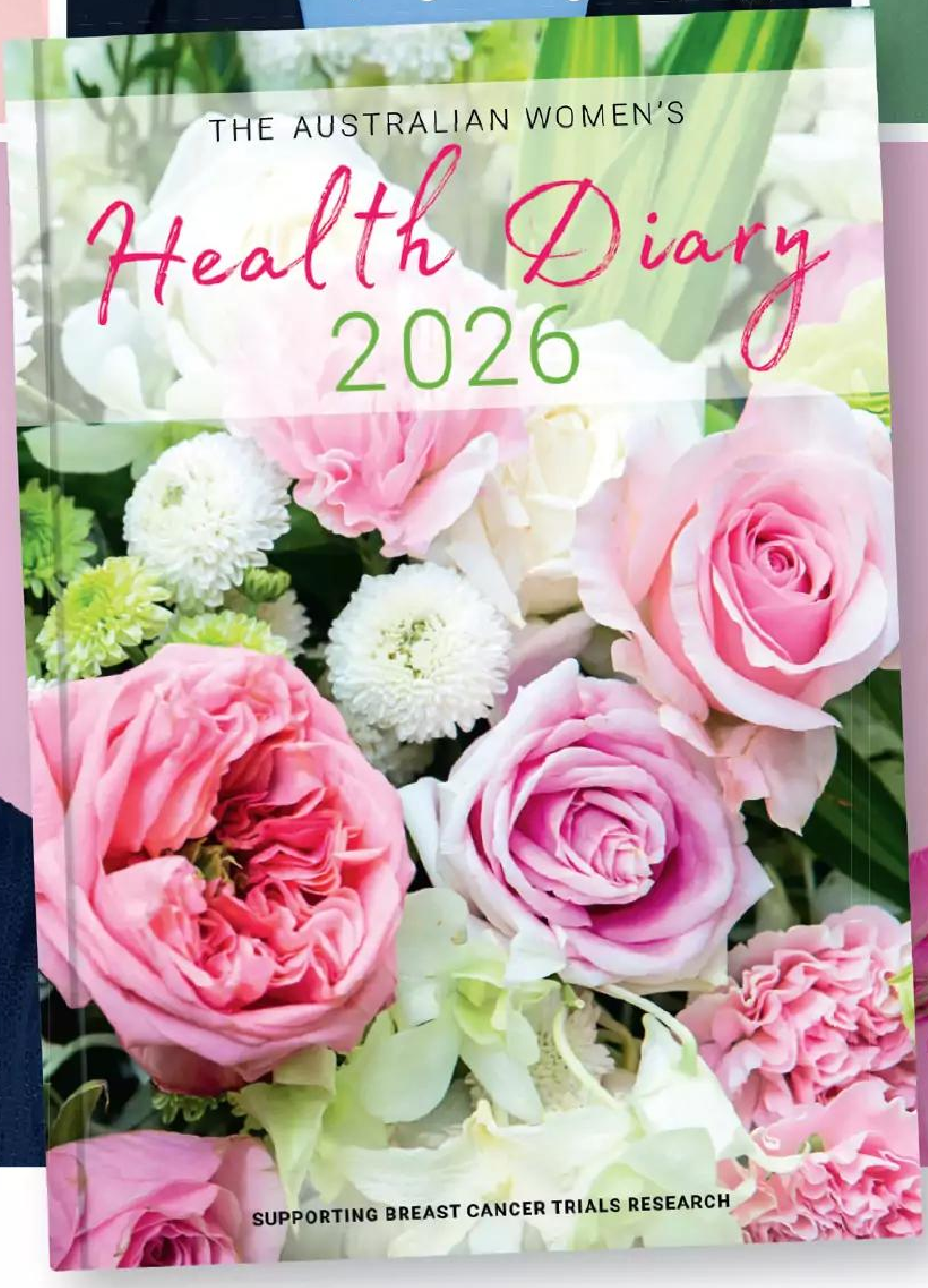
Another design element I rather like is how the magnetic grilles are inlaid into the cabinet when placed on the speakers; it's a nice touch. Ruark recommends keeping the grilles off if you want greater openness, and I have to agree. However, it doesn't spoil the speakers' overall performance if you prefer to keep them on.

The speakers, especially when paired with their matching R610 streaming amplifier, are compact and flexible enough

Beverley, diagnosed age 63


Julie, diagnosed age 43

Selma, first diagnosed age 48 then 72



Ine, diagnosed age 57

Anna, diagnosed age 46

BUY THE DIARY THAT SAVES LIVES

SUPPORT BREAST CANCER RESEARCH

This diary does more than help organise our lives, it's packed with expert health advice important to every woman – like breast, heart, finance and mental health, along with diet, exercise and lots more.

Plus you'll be helping identify new treatments that save and improve the lives of people with breast cancer.

$19.99 from Newsagents, Woolworths, Participating Post Offices & womenshealthdiary.com.au

BREAST CANCER TRIALS

breastcancertrials.org.au ☎ 1800 423 444

to be placed in various spaces, including on desks, cabinets, and other furniture. However, I'd recommend giving them a little breathing space for the best results, as it allows the Sabre-R to be more open and lively. If you're able to, placing them on dedicated speaker stands, and positioning them at least 20cm into the room, will yield the most even balance.

You'll find a set of small rubber feet on their base and each speaker weighs 5kg.

LISTENING SESSIONS

Before I paired the R610 with the Sabre-R speakers, I first connected my reference Epos ES-7N standmount speakers. Upon first listen, I was met with a smooth, spacious and open sound.

The R610 delivered a dynamic and detailed presentation, allowing high frequencies to soar while keeping basslines in check. There is ample punch and impact to the low end, while a taut and agile sense of rhythm got me into the groove of the song being played.

> "As was the case with the R-610, I found myself listening to song after song, enjoying the presentation."

The bite and shine in the sharper edges of Fontaines D.C.'s 'Starburster' is crisp and full of attitude, but it never sounds thin or harsh.

There is textural depth and body to the cello and piano in Agnes Obel's 'The Curse', while the soundscape is layered. The R610 delivers a pleasing breadth of scale as orchestral pieces ebb and flow, with the sense of build-up towards a rousing crescendo coming through with a good amount of drama and weight.

I was so pleased with the R610's performance that I found myself playing through a little bit of everything from '60s Dusty Springfield to '70s Bowie, '90s grunge rock to modern shiny pop — the R610 took it all in stride.

Piano notes glide across fluidly but with enough intent when fingertips hit ivory; Outkast's frenetic energy in 'B.O.B.' is relayed with verve and propulsive momentum; voices are conveyed with clarity and dynamic subtlety.

In terms of speaker matching, I did get a sense that the R610 was holding back a touch with my reference pair; that it wasn't sounding *quite* as free and lively as I would expect.

I swapped the Epos speakers for the mid-priced Bowers & Wilkins 606 S3 (reviewed in AHF issue #537, page 50). All of the R610's positive qualities remained, but the combination still sounded rather reserved.

With the Ruark Sabre-R speakers connected, the R610 comes to life. There is a greater spring in its step, the mid to high frequencies have greater shine and sweetness, and I noticed a clear step up in rhythmic agility and fluidity.

Vocals in particular sound far more immediate and natural – you can hear greater nuance in the emotion and inflections in voices when listening through the Sabre-R speakers.

Overall, it's a more engaging and dynamic sound. The Sabre-R speakers are clearly tuned to match the R610, so it makes sense that they sound their best when paired together.

A dedicated review of the Sabre-R speakers follows this one and it goes into greater detail about the small speakers. The short of it, however, is that they and the R610 fit together like two pieces of a puzzle. They flow together in perfect harmony, highlighting each other's strengths and delivering a cohesive performance.

If you are considering buying the R610, then the Sabre-R should be considered its most natural pairing.

If space is tight and you need an even

The Sabre-R speakers are perfectly matched for the R610, but can also be integrated into a system comprising other branded components.

smaller pair of speakers, then the titchy Neat Iota II are a good fit – their energy and dynamism suit the R610 well, although they're perhaps not quite as refined as the Ruark pairing.

The Ruark R610 streaming amplifier is a fine example of what can be accomplished in such a compact, multi-faceted form, and at this price. It's a gorgeous piece of design, is lovely to use and however you listen to music — vinyl, streaming, CD, radio — it delivers an engaging, convincing performance.

As for the Sabre-R speakers on their own, they perform equally well. Not only did I pair them with the R-610, but I also tried them out with other integrated amplifiers, including the Naim Nait XS 2, Arcam A5 and Rega Brio Mk7.

The immediate thing that struck me was the Sabre-R's wonderfully sweet quality with voices. That midrange is the highlight here and, along with a fairly nimble and lively presentation, is what makes these speakers very appealing to listen to.

No matter what song or genre I played, from Doechii to Chaka Khan to Nick Cave to Fontaines D.C., voices stood out in particular. There's nuance and detail, but the Sabre-R do a particularly great job of communicating the tone, attitude and emotion of each artist as the words are sung.

The speakers are also detailed enough to convey the differences in recording quality and eras, but don't make a fuss about them.

There is a decent body to the sound, especially across that talented midrange, but without things ever sounding overly warm or rich. The drivers are very well integrated, too, with the treble sounding smooth and never sticking out unduly from the rest of the frequencies.

Rhythmically, the Sabre-R are agile and zippy, and flow along with a momentum that keeps your attention and, more importantly, entertained. Each song's personality shines through: the Ruarks have a knack for getting across the mood and message of a song, whether it's the achingly heartfelt and heavy tone of Sparklehorse's 'Eyepennies', Doechii's slick and playful character in 'Denial Is A River', or the pop-tastic upbeat energy of Charli XCX's '1999'.

There's ample punch and a fluid quality to the overall presentation. As was the case with the R-610, I found myself listening to song after song, enjoying the presentation. The Sabre-Rs can be pushed to higher volumes without losing control, too, with its agile, spritely nature remaining intact and only increasing in energy and immediacy. You shouldn't expect lashings of deep bass from a speaker of this size, but I did feel the bass on offer was taute and well defined. The low-end performance is rather soft and hazy at the edges, meaning that the powerful, grippy basslines in Dr Dre's 'Forgot About Dre' and Massive Attack's 'Paradise Circus' don't quite have the driving, snappy impact I expected to hear.

To test them further, I switched to John Williams' 'Theme From Jurassic Park', and while the Sabre-R are subtle and dynamic with the midrange, they aren't quite as adept with large-scale dynamics. As the string and wind instruments join in after the initial flute solo, there's a slight lack of tangible drama and weight as the orchestra swells.

When comparing the Sabre-R against the B&W 606 S3, it's clear the Ruark pair aren't quite as talented with regards to separation between voices and instruments in the soundstage. The B&W pair delivers a larger sense of scale and more sweeping, contrasting dynamics. The 606 S3 admittedly have considerably larger cabinets than the Sabre-R, but it's clear they're able to deliver a greater degree of clarity and detail, too.

In spite of these misgivings, the Sabre-R are a pleasing, charming listen. They perhaps aren't the best at everything — not the most precise, not the clearest, not the most detailed — but the way they knit all elements together and deliver such a musical, emotive performance is impressive, and something that even more established brands struggle to match. The way these speakers convey voices with such delicacy is something quite special.

The Ruark's presentation won't win everyone over, but if their specific skills appeal to what you prioritise when listening to music, especially if you have a small space to work with, they are worth an audition.

If you are considering buying the R610 streaming amplifier, then you shouldn't look anywhere beyond the Sabre-R speakers – they are, literally, made for each other, sonically and visually. If you'd like to integrate them into your current system, then you'll need to be careful with partnering amplifiers. In my testing, I found the Rega Brio R Mk7's rhythmic precision to be a good match.

They're not all-rounders, but if you can live with some of their drawbacks in favour of what they do really well — a talented midrange and a fluid, cohesive rhythm — you will be rewarded. **Kash Kabir**

SPECS & CONTACT

Brand: Ruark Audio
Models: R-610, Sabre-R
RRP: $2,299 (R-610); $1,499 (Sabre-R)
Warranty: Two years (each)

Distributor: Synergy Audio Visual
T: (03) 9459 7474
E: info@synergyaudio.com
W: www.synergyaudio.com

Feature

Come on Apple, where's Apple Music 'Connect'?

The long-awaited launch of Qobuz Connect earlier this year was a huge win for the hi-fi industry, particularly for those who have a strong preference for streaming but who also want to be able to listen to their favourite tunes in the best possible quality. Now though, it leaves just one rather sizable hole left to be filled from a certain fruit-based global tech juggernaut. I am, of course, talking about Apple Music. The highly popular music streaming service has seemingly been rather bullish in its stance on true lossless streaming, instead encouraging its users to continue using AirPlay to wirelessly stream music from an iPhone or Mac to their streaming component of choice. Here, Kash Kabir muses on what an 'Apple Connect' future might look like.

Apple Music has been my go-to streaming service for the last ten years. I started using it as soon as the streaming service launched on 30th June 2015 and I've not stopped using it since. Thanks to its clean interface, excellent catalogue and integration with iOS devices, not to mention its very intuitive algorithm for music recommendations and expertly curated playlists, have kept me in good company for the last decade.

It sounds good, too. While I find Tidal to sound punchier and more detailed, and Qobuz to offer greater clarity, I still find that Apple Music sounds, well, musical when played through headphones, wireless speakers and hi-fi streamers. It's clear, dynamic, well-balanced and sounds particularly natural and emotive with voices.

Since launch, Apple Music has grown swiftly to compete with streaming giant Spotify in catalogue (over 100 million songs) and it boasts 93 million paid subscribers. Let us also not forget it also made spatial audio mainstream and introduced 24-bit hi-res lossless tiers (from 48kHz to 192kHz sample rates) at no extra cost.

In fact, while rival streaming services have increased their prices multiple times or have different pricing for different audio quality tiers, Apple Music has only implemented one significant price rise for its main individual tier. In Australia, it started at $9.99 per month; it's now $12.99 per month.

I always reach for Apple Music when I'm listening on headphones or through Bluetooth speakers, especially when at home. At work, however, I tend to use Tidal Connect and Qobuz Connect – not just because of their better sound quality, but also because the Connect version of those streaming services makes streaming to hi-fi kit so much easier, and I get to listen in hi-res quality.

EASY STREAMING

When Apple Music celebrated its 10th anniversary in June, I wondered what I'd like to see changed or improved about the platform. And I quickly realised that what I wanted wasn't anything to do with Apple Music itself, but with AirPlay. Indeed, this Apple wireless protocol is in serious need of an upgrade.

Streaming products are becoming more common these days, and the ability to stream in 24-bit hi-res quality is also becoming more widespread as music fans want better quality sound. It's not just wireless speakers that boast Bluetooth, AirPlay or internet radio; network music streamers from WiiM, Eversolo, Bluesound, Cambridge Audio, all-in-one systems from Ruark, Naim and more do, too – and they now support Tidal Connect or Qobuz Connect, or both!

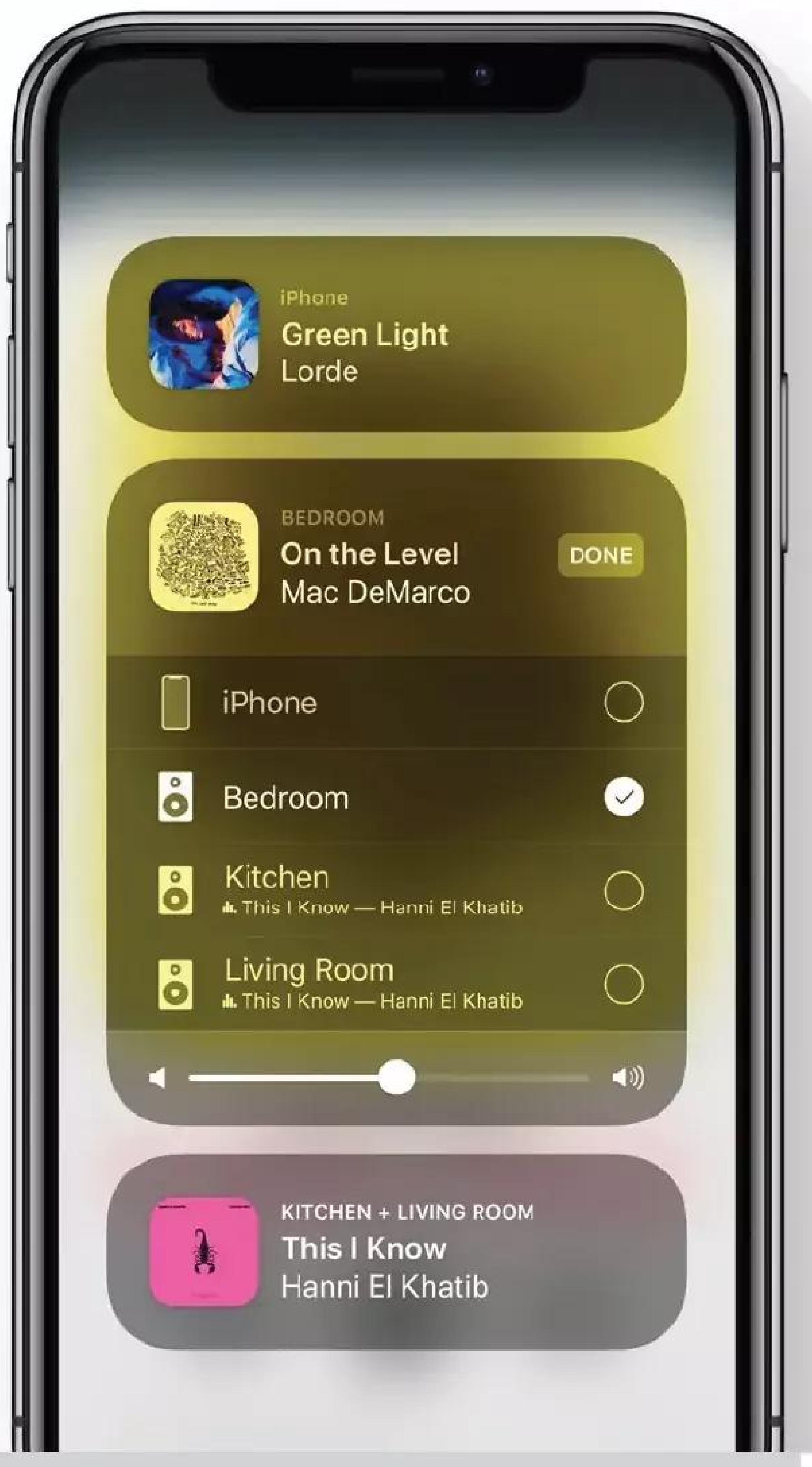
I use a WiiM Pro Plus in my home hi-fi system and it allows me to stream music from Qobuz/Tidal in hi-res quality over a network so easily, and without my phone's apps or notifications affecting the playback makes for a rewarding music listening experience.

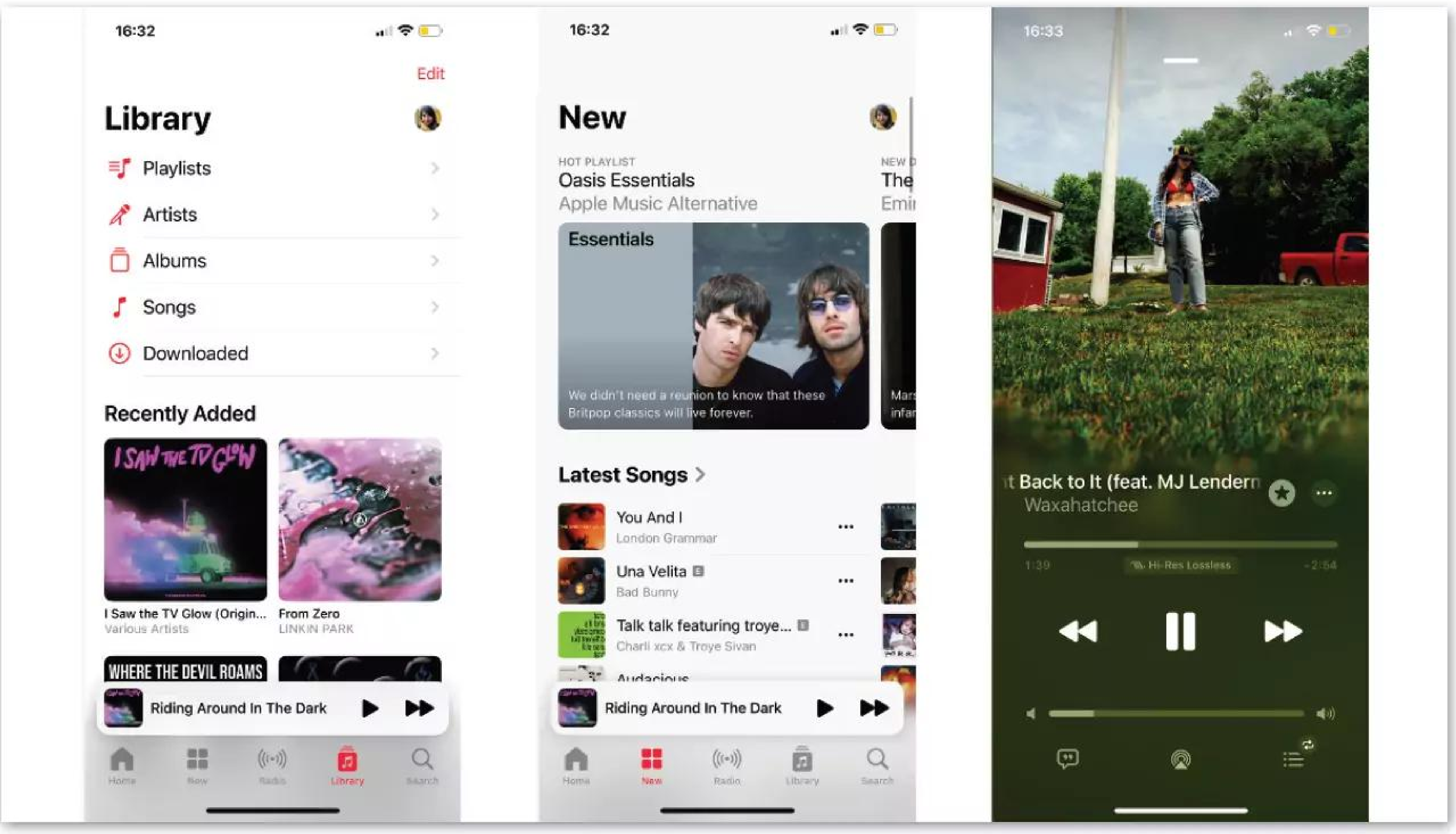
AirPlay, in comparison, is lagging behind. AirPlay is already integrated into a huge number of third-party wireless speakers, streamers, music systems, AV receivers and more. Unlike many of Apple's iOS-only features that remain within its own ecosystem, AirPlay is widely available for all.

It's a shame, then, that it hasn't evolved into a Connect version that would allow Apple Music's subscribers to enjoy their library in a more streamlined and higher-quality way.

The most recent update, AirPlay 2, brought us multi-room playback, which was necessary for its HomePod speakers, but I hope upgrading AirPlay to a full Connect model is something Apple will consider in the near future.

Apple Music is extremely good value considering it offers high-resolution audio as part of a standard subscription.





AirPlay 2 certainly has its benefits, including easy multi-room audio, but it limits the audio quality songs can be streamed in.

AirPlay 2 is a wireless protocol that allows you to stream music (and video) content from your Apple device over your home network to supported products, and claims to deliver 16-bit/44.1kHz quality streams. It's a big step up, both technically and sonically, over super lossy Bluetooth.

Unlike other streaming apps, Apple doesn't allow for Apple Music to have integrated support in third-party hi-fi kit – so you have to rely on AirPlay to stream Apple Music tunes (especially from an iOS device; Android users can use Chromecast) in better-than-Bluetooth quality to your chosen hi-fi streamer. The one exception here is Eversolo, which allows you to download the Apple Music Android app directly onto its streamers, which allows you to play in full hi-res.

However, with AirPlay, the songs streamed come via your smartphone or tablet rather than from the streaming service's servers in the cloud – so if you close the app on your phone, have a call coming in, or play a video, it will interrupt and affect playback.

In comparison, the Connect version for both Tidal and Qobuz sends music straight from their servers to the connected hi-fi product, leaving your phone free to be used as you wish and solely as a remote, with no interruptions affecting the playback. It's such a smoother experience.

A FRUITFUL FUTURE?

This is the main upgrade I'd love to see implemented in the next iteration of AirPlay. It would make more sense and streamline the protocol's use when streaming my Apple Music library to hi-fi products.

The second update I'd still like to see is one that we've mentioned before. Apple Music's catalogue has songs in lossless hi-res (24-bit) quality, but there is still no way to wirelessly stream that quality, either to its own AirPods or via AirPlay to hi-fi or wireless systems.

Apple Music's hi-res files are in the ALAC lossless format (an alternative to FLAC). However, when streaming using AirPlay 2, this gets downsampled to the lossy AAC format (a Bluetooth standard) – which means at no point are you ever getting to enjoy the hi-res or even full CD-spec lossless quality that the 100+ million songs are available in from your Apple Music library.

You can still access it if you go wired all the way, with a DAC in between your Apple Music source and endpoint – but that defeats the point of a wireless ecosystem, and seems retrograde when hi-res wireless is now available more widely.

And while I can live with AAC quality when listening to my AirPods Pro over Bluetooth, I feel shortchanged when I'm streaming to a network player or wireless system – be it WiiM, Naim, Ruark or any other AirPlay-supporting kit – and I can't hear my well-curated Apple Music library and playlists in hi-res quality like I can with Qobuz Connect and Tidal Connect.

The advent of Qobuz Connect earlier this year made the difference all the more stark, and proved just how much a Connect version of AirPlay would bring.

Another minor bug bear is the fact Apple doesn't make it particularly easy to find which songs and albums are available in hi-res lossless. Searching the term doesn't return any results, nor are there dedicated playlists like the ones you'll find on Qobuz. Apple seems to place a greater emphasis on music available in spatial audio, but I personally would prefer higher quality streams over more immersive ones.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I understand that Apple wants to prioritise seamless connection and integration across its own devices and when using its own technology, and AirPlay does offer that with success, even if it's at the expense of dropping audio quality.

The majority of Apple users likely don't care about codecs or bitrates and would rather their products simply worked smoothly 100 per cent of the time. And I agree here, too.

As part of the smaller percentage who does also care very much about getting the best sound quality from your kit, however, I simply wish for better.

For those of us who use Apple Music as their main streaming source and would love to hear its full quality through our excellent hi-fi kit and catch up with rivals, we can only hope that Apple decides to get a little more audiophile when thinking about AirPlay 3, and delivers a fully Connect-style version as a proper upgrade.

Let's hope it appears before another decade passes for Apple Music, though!

Kash Kabir

Eversolo is the only brand I can think of that offers native, high-res streaming from Apple Music via its source components.

Obituary: **Tom Waters**

Tom Waters, a long-time contributor to *Australian Hi-Fi* magazine and a long-time president of the Sydney Audio Club, died peacefully on August 7, 2025, after a four-year battle with multiple myeloma.

Born in Moose Jaw, in the province of Saskatchewan, Canada, on April 5, 1952, Waters studied computer science at Saskatchewan University. After obtaining his degree he took a gap year to visit his brother Norman, who'd moved to Australia… a year that would change his life. After working here briefly for Yellow Pages he returned to Canada, where he worked in the IT industry for many years for various companies before deciding to relocate to Sydney.

Waters immigrated to Australia in 1984 and worked for several US-based companies including Compaq and Hewlett-Packard, where he established a reputation for his ability to create and customise software to suit their local operations. It was while working for HP that Tom met Ewa Pawlus, the woman who would become his life partner. Waters' profession was programming, but his passions were music and the equipment necessary to reproduce that music at the highest level, a passion that came into being when he was just twelve years old, upon hearing The Beatles and subsequently purchasing his (and their!) first LP, *Please Please Me*. According to his friend George Davidson, also a former President of the Sydney Audio Club, Tom's dedication to sound quality was at such a high level that he'd describe it as obsessional. "Tom was a man who demanded quality — a job done right — and true to that, his quest for the best audio led him to acquire not just a formidable array of audio equipment, but also build a purpose-built listening room in which to enjoy his amazing system and the beautiful music that poured out of it," he said. "He was the ultimate tweaker and dedicated many hours to evaluating and comparing all manner of hi-fi gadgets, cables, room treatments, DACs, amplifiers and speakers."

As he grew older, Waters' musical tastes expanded to include other genres: In an interview with John Vandyke published in *Australian Hi-Fi*, he said "I listen to about 50 per cent jazz, 40 per cent classical and the balance includes world music, blues, country and so on. Some of my favourites are Ray Brown, Gene Harris, Miles Davis, Anouar Brahem, John Surman, Josef Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven."

Along with his musical tastes, his audio system also evolved, but at its core were his beloved Mark Levinson 33H monobloc power amplifiers, which he's on record as saying were his favourites. His decision must have been a tough one, because his system also included a Gryphon Mikado Signature CD player, a Levinson 3265 preamp and Gryphon Atlantis speakers. Waters' tweaking abilities were evidenced by the fact he used different interconnects in different applications, opting for AudioQuest WEL Signature to connect the Gryphon to the 3265 and Synergistic Research Tesla Precision Reference to connect the 3265 to the 33Hs. His speaker cable of choice was Synergistic Research's Tesla Apex design. Waters believed that mains power purity was a foundation of great sound, to which end his system included three separate dedicated 20-amp 240V circuits feeding Synergistic Research Hologram and Quantum Resonant power conditioners as well as a Quantum Resonant Technology QX-4 Power Purifier.

Image: Edgar Kramer

Waters has previously stated that continuity of timbre and realistic instrument and vocal sound were all of equal importance to him.

Waters' journey in audio involved not just himself but also many other audiophiles thanks to his ability to enlighten, motivate and support others developing a similar interest. This passion saw him join the Sydney Audio Club established by John McEvoy in 2007. In 2011 he became president of the club, a position he held until 2020, when his illness prevented further involvement at executive level. "Tom's resignation after some ten years of hard work was marked by a unanimous awarding of an Honorary Life Membership," said McEvoy. "In fact, without his dedicated leadership, guidance, knowledge, contacts and sheer hard work, the club may not even exist today."

Waters not only avidly read hi-fi publications, he became a writer for them as well, first for *Australian Hi-Fi* magazine and then later for *StereoNet* and *Soundstage! Australia*, writing reviews of equipment and interviewing fellow audiophiles as well as luminaries such as Bill Low, CEO of Audioquest. *Soundstage! Australia*'s editor, Edgar Kramer, says of Waters, who was not only a contributor, but also a personal friend: "Tom was an avid music lover and a passionate audiophile with a gentle disposition and a sharp wit. He authored deep insights into the products he reviewed for me. Tom's blend of subtle wit and sharp analysis made him a popular and respected voice in the Australian audio community."

George Davidson also appreciated Waters' many talents. "As vice president, I was both impressed and grateful for his leadership and the trust he showed in me. Club members were inspired by the friendships nurtured and quality musical appreciation enjoyed over a glass of red and Ewa's generous suppers. Tom was always patient and always sought solutions that were best for the club and its members and always weighted with respect, care and a mild-mannered sense of humour. Tom gathered around him a formidable committee and his commitment and obvious enthusiasm motivated and consolidated them, ensuring that an already-good club developed into a very successful, popular and well respected club."

George's high opinion of Tom is one shared by all those who knew him, not least Edgar Kramer, who recalls: "Whilst he was president of the Sydney Audio Club, Tom was the administrative glue that held the club together through a 10-year tenure. Tom's absence will be deeply felt, not only in the industry and the community he so loved, but also in the musical moments between friends when sharing a passion."

Tom Waters is survived by his partner Ewa, her children Natalie and Luc, and his brother Norman and his children.

9 AFFORDABLE WAYS TO UPGRADE YOUR HI-FI SYSTEM

As many dedicated enthusiasts will already know, your hi-fi system is never really complete. We always find the need to constantly tweak, upgrade and improve upon our current music system.

But upgrading your hi-fi doesn't always have to mean racking up a big bill, or swapping out your current product for a brand new, shiny, step-up model.

In fact, some of the upgrades we are about to talk you through here are completely free. That's right, nada, zilch, zip, nothing at all. Sometimes, honing your system simply involves ensuring your current system is set up in a way that gets the very best out of each component.

So if you can't currently afford that amplifier capable of powering a gig venue or don't have space for a set of floorstanders, then why not give these suggestions a whirl? You may be surprised at just how much extra performance you can eke out of your existing kit.

ADJUST PLACEMENT AND POSITIONING

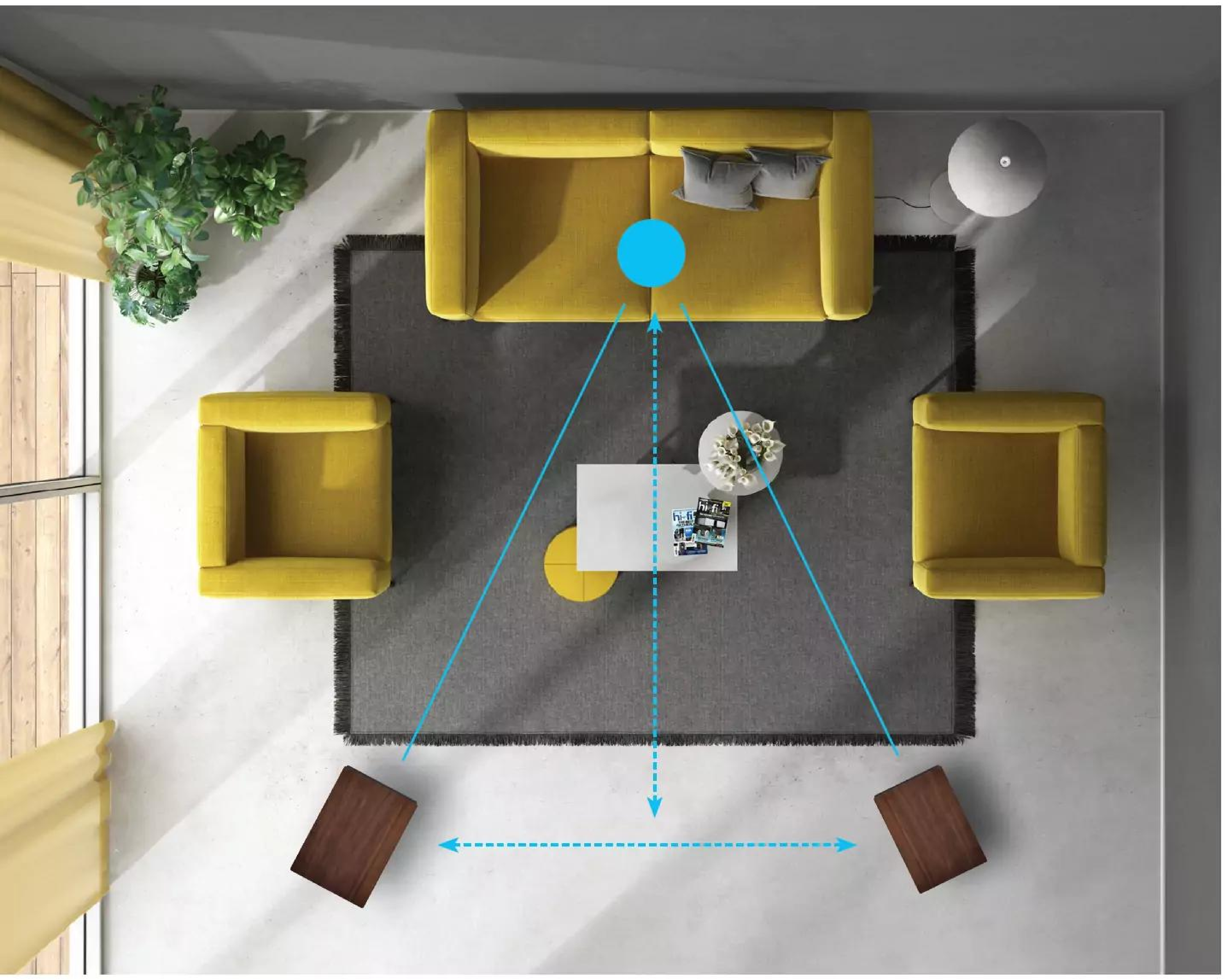
Hopefully you spent some time positioning your speakers correctly when you got them set up in your listening space. At the very least, you've got them facing the right way (i.e. drivers facing away from the wall, slightly angled inwards in most cases – always check the manufacturer's recommendations).

Placing them close to any wall will reinforce their low-frequency output; an idea which may initially appeal but, on most models, doing so also spoils bass agility and precision. Most are designed to be at least 30cm clear of a rear wall and a minimum of a metre from any side walls.

Pointing the speakers inwards towards the listening position will almost always help to firm up the stereo imaging (though there are the odd exceptions that prefer to fire straight ahead, such as Dali speakers), but go too far and the soundstage width will suffer.

It's not just speakers that benefit from careful placement. Ideally, you want the rest of your kit, especially turntables, placed away from your speakers (as far as your room allows) in order to restrict any vibrations that can tamper with the sound.

Especially — and this one might be



Correct speaker positioning is one of the easiest and most effective upgrades you can give your system.

divisive — you ought to avoid positioning your system between your speakers: though it might look tidier, and the symmetry more attractive, it'll spoil the stereo imaging.

MAXIMISE YOUR POWER SUPPLY

There are varying lengths to which you can stretch in the pursuit of better powering your system.

The simplest is merely to ensure the mains plugs you're using are clean (best done by treating the pins with a cleaning solution – and ensuring they're dry afterwards) and all the components are connected as close together as possible. This means not plugging in your preamp on one side of the room and your power amp on the other. This improves system grounding and so can help sound quality.

You could go even further and give your hi-fi a dedicated feed from your fuse box (with the help of a qualified electrician, of course). This will bypass everything else plugged into the mains that'll be adding noise to the signal – from your TV to the fridge.

> Pointing speakers inwards towards the listening position will almost always help to firm up stereo imaging.

Admittedly, this isn't a length worth going to for a budget system, but there are greater gains to be made the higher up the food chain you go.

Many products could also benefit from an updated power supply. For instance, spending on $99 Pro-Ject's High Power It 2 power supply upgrade can work wonders for improving the overall dynamism and authority on some Pro-Ject turntables. If you think an upgraded power supply is something your system could benefit from, your local hi-fi dealer should be able to provide you with some great options and set you on a clearer path (pun absolutely intended).

REMOVE THE GRILLES

Speaker grilles are great for keeping dust, pets and sticky young fingers away from the drivers, but they do get in the way a bit.

For the most part, engineers tune speakers with the grilles off, so leaving them in place effectively places a barrier between you and the sound being emitted.

Knowing this, said grilles are made to be as thin and unobtrusive as possible, but if you take them off and have a look at the frame and material, you can imagine how sound will still be affected.

If you have the energy to remove and replace the grilles each time you use your speakers, you needn't really compromise either on the protection or performance of your speakers.

SUPPORT YOUR SPEAKERS...

This is realistically another obvious observation, but if your standmounters are still propped up on the box they came in or are on the floor, now is the time to invest in some proper speaker stands before we call the hi-fi police. Simply, you want your speakers to be as rigid as possible, so any movement of the drive-unit diaphragm goes into moving air rather than the speaker cabinet.

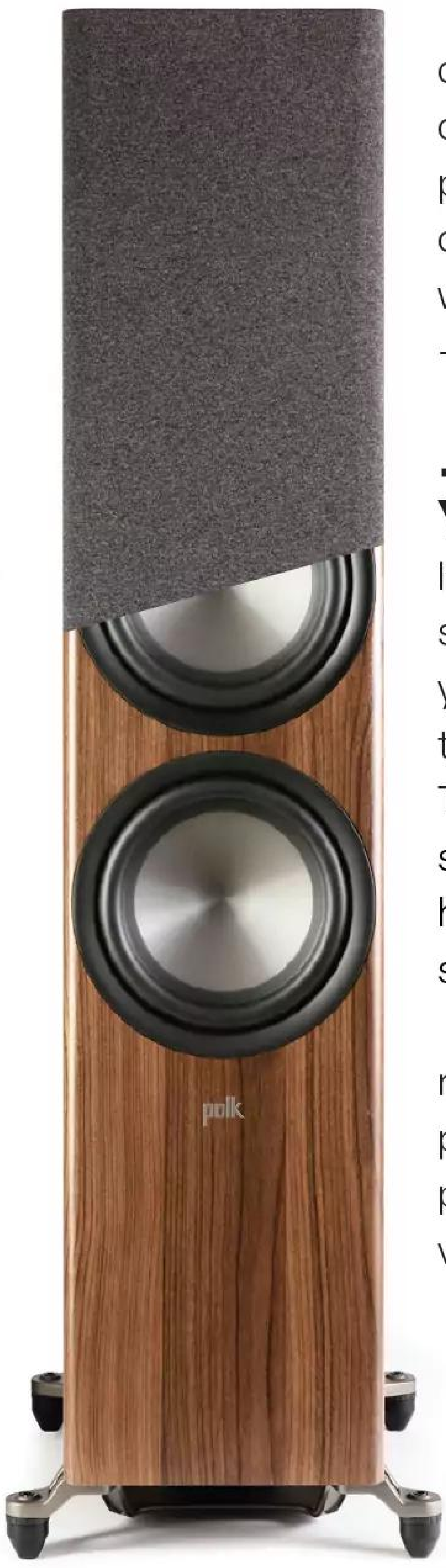
For owners of floorstanders, make sure those spikes are screwed into the base of your speakers. If you have suspended wooden floorboards, a decent trick is to drill a few screws into the ground for the spikes to sit in – that way your speakers will stay rigidly in place.

Stability isn't exclusively to do with support, however: your drivers will also be bolted into place, and making sure every so often that those fixings are tight – while being sure not to overtighten – is decent practice.

...AND THE REST OF YOUR KIT

If you've gone to great lengths to support and isolate your speakers, you owe the same courtesy to the rest of your system as well. The simplest way to get your kit singing is to invest in a designated hi-fi rack, or you can indulge in a spot of home DIY.

If you go the latter route, just remember that the ideal support is perfectly level, low-resonance and placed as far away from sources of vibration as possible.



Speaker grilles certainly have their purpose, but you're going to eke out the very best performance from your pair if you set them free.

A dedicated DAC, even a cost-effective model, is almost always going to perform better than one integrated in other source components.

A floorstanding support will work fine on a hard concrete floor, although a record player on the same support on a suspended floor will be affected by footfall. If that's what you have, we recommend investing in a dedicated wall shelf.

ADD A DAC

If you have digital components in your system but have not already invested in a designated outboard digital-to-analogue converter (DAC), doing so will bring noticeable benefits.

Simply put, the burden of converting a digital signal, all those 1s and 0s, into an analogue one will be lifted from the rest of your kit and taken on by a component specially designed to do the job. A bit like having someone do your tax return for you so you can focus on more important things like going to the pub.

While it won't make bad hi-fi sound great, your system's performance can benefit in every regard when paired with a capable, separate DAC.

UPGRADE YOUR PHONO STAGE

This one is restricted to those who have a turntable in their system, of course, but even if your record player or amplifier (or even active speakers) has a phono stage built in, as with an outboard DAC, you could improve performance by upgrading to a dedicated one.

A phono stage provides extra amplification – the output of your cartridge can be in the order of a thousand times less than a typical CD player – and equalises the tonal balance, which, because of vinyl's physical limitations, is skewed heavily toward the higher frequencies.

It's an intricate process, so having a separate component devoted to the task really makes sense to get the best out of your vinyl records.

UPGRADE YOUR CABLING

When it comes to cables, there are those who believe using anything more conductive than string will do the job and that spending money on speaker cables and/or interconnects is a waste. All we can tell you from years of first-hand experience is that the differences in performance from our systems when swapping between certain cables are clear to our ears.

That isn't to say spending more means you'll necessarily get a better sound, and those gains will again be dependent on the capabilities of the rest of your kit. But the main job of a cable is to carry the all-important audio signal from one component to another, and so the relationship between the various elements of your system can be as important as what's connecting them as the aptitude of each component.

GET YOUR SYSTEM SERVICED

There are all sorts of things a dealer or manufacturer is able to do when servicing your kit, from giving it a once-over to make sure it's all working as it should, to replacing small parts that may need it and suggesting specific system upgrades that will offer you the greatest sonic returns.

The best product for one person may not be the best for the next, and with dealers knowing the products they stock as well as anyone, you can at least be guided in the right direction before wading through reams of reviews and testing every product on the market for yourself.

You can also indirectly help your system by feeding it clean discs and vinyl in general.

Not all cables are created equal, you'll likely find that upgrading your interconnects and/or speaker cables can make a world of difference.

Meze Audio Poet

Wired headphones

+
- Truly revealing
- Wonderfully open and sparkling
- Very striking and comfortable

−
- Not the last word in sonic attack

RRP **$3,550**

It was an eye-opener, as well as an ear-opener, to sit in on a presentation from Romanian company Meze Audio to the assembled editors of EISA (of which this publication is an Australian member).

I was attending to gather the details on these new Poet headphones, but the majority of the available time was taken up by founder Antonio Meze telling us how lovely the area around Baia Mare is for mountain biking and getting back to nature, and how he still thinks of himself as an arts and design graduate, which is what's really important to him. And he showed us some of his early designs out of art school, and...

All this did at least provide an overview of the company's ethos, while we all waited for engineer Mircea Fanatan (who Meze admits now runs the company day-to-day) to join the call and start talking about the specific technologies in the Poet. Meanwhile, the business, just to let Meze get his bit in, "is more than just a vehicle for commerce.... art is very close to me, my team," and while their business is "serial production, it's a different kind of angle, we enjoy it very much, and we think people can see that in what we do."

This also explains why Meze Audio's headphones have always looked so darn good. The company was founded in 2011 and came to the fore in 2015-2016 with the relatively affordable 99 Classics (currently around $550), the first headphones designed and built by Meze Audio from the ground up. They were also the first headphones I had ever heard from the company. The 99 Classics were designed with a conventional dynamic driver, but the next big move for the company was the Empyrean model in 2018, which was rather pricier (the current Empyrean II is $5,500), partly by virtue of using planar magnetic drivers in an open-backed design.

These then set the scene for future planar magnetic models, including the Elite and the Liric. And according to Fanatan, the new Poet are pretty much open-backed versions of the Liric.

DESIGN AND BUILD

Switching from a closed-back Liric to an open-backed Poet design naturally required internal design changes, including new air vents to modify the Liric's Pressure Equalization System that manages the airflow and earcup chamber pressure.

The beautiful external grille is in copper-finished steel, punctured for acoustic purposes by tiny dots and shapes that might be described as inverted Reuleaux triangles; these also slightly resemble Meze's tuning fork logo.

The chassis frame is magnesium (one presumes an alloy, since pure magnesium is highly reactive), with the casing described as a fibreglass-reinforced polymer. Over the top the headrest is a suede leather strip under the bands of a flexible titanium alloy headband; the earpad material is unspecified but is super soft and leather-like, and these pull off with ease using the same magnetic earpad system from the Liric, though with slightly different magnets. The copper cable is 2.5m, luxurious and hand-braided, terminated with a 6.3mm jack.

Meanwhile, the music-making heart of the Poet is the planar magnetic driver. Planar magnetics are entirely different from the usual 'cone' speaker design, instead using a large flat surface excited into motion by an electromagnetic force created by conductors woven across its surface. The diaphragm itself is extremely light (here just 1/17th of a gram) so that under the EM field its response can be lightning fast, allowing delivery of details potentially beyond cone-based headphones or tweeter domes.

The question marks for planar magnetics are generally around tonal balance and bass delivery in particular — even giant planar magnetic speaker designs are generally supported by conventional cones to shift the significant volume of air required for satisfying bass frequencies.

But that equation is altered by firing the sound straight into your ears, without requiring excitation of all the air in a room. And Meze also has a secret weapon for its planar magnetic designs: its HQ in Baia Mare is only an hour's bus ride from the border with Ukraine, wherein resides the company Rinaro Isodynamics.

Rinaro began originally as part of a USSR Cold War research programme into electroacoustics, but it has spent the last four decades on planar magnetic driver development, for which it has 25 proprietary technologies and 61 international patents filed, including the use of the term 'Isodynamic' as a variation of planar magnetic, much as Yamaha uses 'orthodynamic'. (And I can't help but digress here to mention that Rinaro also recently designed the drivers for one of the world's strangest-looking Bluetooth speakers, the teddy-bear-shaped Be@rbrick Audio 400% — yes, really. Believe me, it is well worth a Google search.)

So in collaboration with Rinaro Isodynamics, Meze has constructed the gorgeous-looking Poet headphones around the same driver platform as the Liric headphone, though specifically using the Rinaro Isodynamic Hybrid Array MZ6, whereas the Liric use the MZ4.

The conductors woven into both drivers differ from the usual patterns, having two shaped voice coils combined on the same diaphragm. At the top, the ovoid-shaped diaphragm is woven with three 'switchback' swirls, but below them a spiral-shaped circle sits in the area directly over the ear canal; this is the most efficient part of the diaphragm for mid-high frequencies, and the positioning is said to improve imaging and spatial localisation. The MZ6 and MZ4 use a similar hybrid array but with a different diaphragm material (on the Poet this is a semi-crystalline polymer film called Parus, one of Rinar's proprietary materials), which makes the MZ6 a synthesis of the MZ4, and of the MZ3SE from Meze's Elite.

I should say that Rinaro not only supplies Meze with its drivers but also works closely to create these exclusively with Meze Audio, their engineers working closely together on tightly tuning them to Meze's required voicing.

> "We like to experiment, to try new things... because it's fun, and we're curious and we would be bored!"

This was raised with interest during the EISA presentation, because Fanatan mentioned that the Poet have been tuned to the slightly warmer sound curve of the company's original Empyrean headphone, as after the more neutral Empyrean II sequel was released, some users said they missed the original's "more relaxed, revealing but easy" sound. This was interesting because one might think that all headphones from a brand would aim for the same sonic curve. Fanatan doesn't agree.

"I wouldn't say we have a 'house' sound," he told the EISA group during our briefing. "Indeed we want to have maybe more than one type of sound in our offering, same as we have different designs, to cater for more tastes. If you were always to chase a curve, at a certain point you would be limited in the headphones you could release; they would cannibalise each other from an acoustic perspective."

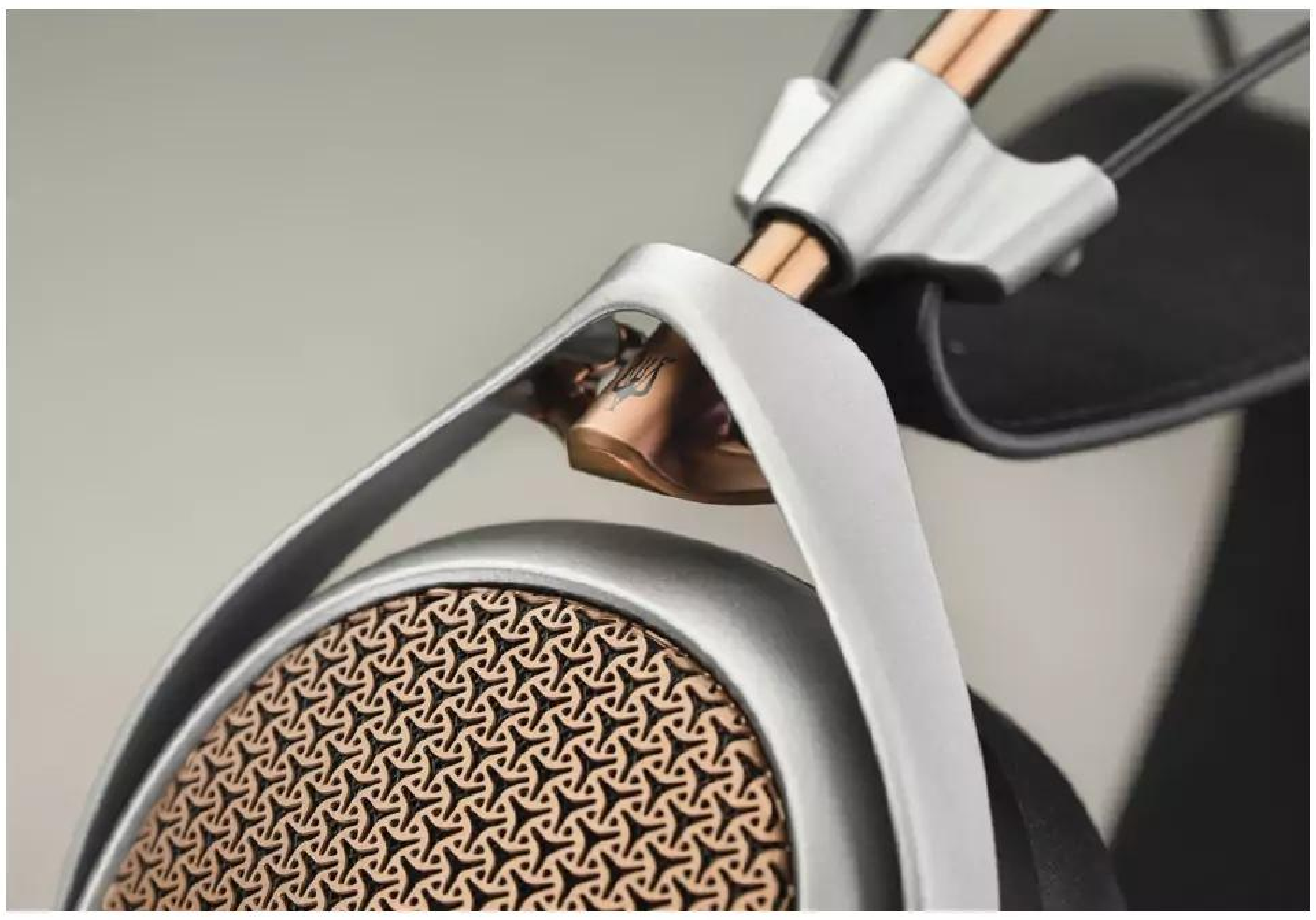
"And we like to experiment, to try new things," added artsy founder Meze, "because it's fun, and we're curious and we would be bored! We are young; we are still finding our sound — it's not by mistake, it's on purpose, playing around."

I asked Fanatan more about this curve 'tuning'. Were Rinaro's drivers a fixed quantity, and Meze Audio then tunes the sound with the headset design? Not at all, he replied. It's actually a combination of driver development and the structure of the headphones.

"So yes we have the earpad and the way we create the acoustic damping on the rear of the headphone itself — these are areas we have in-hand power, as it were," he said. "But always you have to work together with the driver, the resonant frequency, because the curve can look a certain way, but then you have other issues. So we work together with the main acoustic engineer in the Rinaro team and during the development process we get samples every two weeks — we give feedback, they come with the next version."

And what are the variables you can play with on a planar magnetic driver, I asked? Some things must presumably be easier to change than others.

"Mainly it's the tension in the diaphragm, the corrugation in the diaphragm, and the way it's glued on the outer edge. Sometimes you can vary the distance between the magnets and the diaphragm, but that's just in the early phases; at a certain point you have to go to the frame being made by tooling, so some things are then fixed, and you only remain with this



tension, corrugation, type of material, you can also play with the thickness of the material up to a certain level, and the glue. I'm sure there are others, but these are questions for Rinaro — because I know they treat and bake the membrane a certain way, a special treatment after the corrugation... things that are not disclosed even to us [laughs]."

Fascinating insights, then. Let's get listening...

LISTENING SESSIONS

The Poet were simply a delight to use — so very comfortable and remarkably light for the longest sessions, from not only their soft earpads but also the unusually complete rotational freedom of movement in the yokes, so that a seal was assured no matter what strange shape head you might put under them.

For a reviewer, they proved to have only one difficulty: they did so little wrong that I had been using them for several weeks with almost no listening notes other than scrawled messages like ‘wow’, or ‘sparkling high-end’, and then ‘wow’ again. I was just enjoying them so much, across almost all music genres.

Try some indie crunch like Mamalarky‘s *Hex Key*, and let the Poet punch out the opener ‘Broken’ Bones while revealing all the special sonics fashioned by this Texas foursome: the deep, sliding bass line, the fuzz guitar tracking Livvy Bennett's vocal hook, and the relatively clean vocal treatment on this song, compared to the more echoey vocal double-tracking on ‘Won't Give Up’ or the straight-up miking on ‘The Quiet’, with its delightfully weird percussion noises croaking and clicking thrillingly through the planar presentation of the Poet. The broader electronic lifts in this song were made skin-tinglingly electric by the unflappable zing and fizz gifted by these headphones, too.

The electronica of ‘Mystical Plosives’, opening the surprise new Stereolab album, absolutely danced around my listening consciousness, the tight electronic blips each with an individual attack, while fabulous fizzy synth pads entered and departed, a delight that was disappointing only in its brevity.

‘Believer’ from Imagine Dragons kicks off with some bass fuzz, acoustic drums and clapping: all utterly natural through the Poet, as was the vocal, its additional multitracking clearly realised on the second verse, and with no crush to the rising complexities of the arrangement as the song hit the raised chorus.

I chose an appropriate Philip Glass track, ‘The Poet Acts’, to begin my classical listening, and of course planar magnetics are hypnotically successful in general with such fare. Here the Poet reacted with delicacy to the rising strings, and were ready to soar with more dynamic selections: *Rachmaninov's Symphony No. 1 (LSO, Valery Gerfiev, 24-bit/96kHz)* was spread before me with a wide and deep soundstage, rising from the near-silence of deep strings rising to climax in the brass chorale, all portrayed here at full strength, positioning and tones held real and strong no matter the intensity of the orchestration, and no excess to force it down. A friendly delivery.

Failures? Sometimes the Poet were revealing so much that it could take time to settle into a mix. For example, the production on Robert Forster's new album *Strawberries* sounded brash and flat directly after the Stereolab selections; it took most of the first track to relax into this less expansive presentation, and even then I found that the material notably better suited the fuller dynamics of, say, the far less pricey propositions, such as the Sennheiser HD 550 (and even better on the cheaper HD 560S, sounding richer, fuller, more organic and open).

The Poet, nevertheless, confirmed Forster's songwriting here — ‘Breakfast On The Train, Such A Shame’ — remains as brilliant as ever.

Led Zeppelin, as usual, failed in digital and here also planar magnetic form to create the impact it deserves: whether ‘Immigrant Song’ or ‘Kashmir’ (Qobuz 24-bit/96kHz), Bonham's drums simply lacked the sheer weight and power of his true playing. ‘Kashmir’’s other elements were clear, the stereo imaging precise and individually portrayed, with such detail that even the mixed-out Mellotron strings from the first verse were quite audible in the left channel between Plant's lines. But these things are all supposed to dance around the central pounding of the drums; without their weight the song just limped along insipidly. For some uncertain reason, Zeppelin seems to require vinyl and big speakers to come through correctly; perhaps it's the remasters, or perhaps you just had to be there in the 1970s.

This did put me onto a weakness that I had hardly noticed until the Zeppelin moment, which was an absolute lack of whack, welly and sheer air movement when really required. On Metallica's ‘Enter Sandman’ (Qobuz 2021 remaster, 24-bit/96kHz), the drum entry rumbled, certainly, and the panned guitars were full and deeply supported by the driving bass, but again, the drums weren't adding quite the power they should to drive things along and shake the ceiling.

If your preferred music is driven in this way by big acoustic drum sounds, then, I would recommend hearing your faves against a similarly priced pair of dynamic headphones, just to check your preference. Because for pretty much everything else, where detail and sheer musicality could bring music to life, the Poet delivered endless hours of delight and revelation.

CONCLUSION

Mr Meze has certainly succeeded in his desire to create an *objet d'art* here, but beautiful form has also fed the sonic functionality of the Poet headphone, so that the laidback but shining sounds reaching your ears are as beautiful as the shining highlights on the outside. Worthy winners of their ‘EISA Premium Headphones 2025-2026’ Award indeed.

Jez Ford

SPECS & CONTACT

Type: Open-backed, over-ear, wired, planar magnetic
Driver: Rinaro hybrid array MZ6, area 3507mm2
Cable length: 2.5m
Quoted frequency response: 4Hz-96kHz
Sensitivity: 101dB SPL/mW @ 1kHz
Nominal impedance: 55 ohms
Weight: 405g

Contact: Meze Audio
T: +40 770 769 376
E: support@mezeaudio.com
W: mezeaudio.com

esoterica

SIMPLY MAGNETIC

Yamaha expands its audiophile planar headphone range with two new more-affordable pairs

REVIEWED

E.A.T. F-Dur/F-Note Turntable & Tonearm

Superb set is audible perfection

E.A.T. F-Dur/F-Note

Turntable & Tonearm

+
- 12-inch tonearm
- Silent operation
- Speed stability

−
- Lacks dustcover
- Only two speeds

RRP **$18,999**

Is a longer one better than a shorter one? That question has been divisive since the beginning of time. But when it comes to tonearms, absolutely no debate is necessary, because longer tonearms give far superior sonic results to shorter ones.

And although E.A.T.'s F-Dur incorporates a great deal of technology that puts it into the very highest echelons of vinyl-spinners — no doubt partly responsible for it currently holding the honour of being named by the Expert Imaging and Sound Association (EISA) as 'Best Product of the Year' in the Premium Turntable category, the feature that to my mind most sets it apart from the crowd is that it is fitted with E.A.T.'s F-Note 304.8mm (12-inch) tonearm, which is a full 50.8mm longer than the next-best length, (10”) and a whopping 74.8mm longer than the 9-inch tonearm, which is the length of the tonearms you'll find fitted to almost all turntables.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LENGTH

To understand why tonearm length is important, you first need to know how an LP record is created. The essence of the process is that a musical signal is fed to a cutter head, which cuts a groove in a lacquer 'master' which is then plated and used to create metal stampers. These stampers are then pressed down into soft vinyl to create the final product (an LP). By-passing what I find a constant wonder (that such a rough 'n ready process can result in a product that delivers exquisite sound quality) I need to point out that when it's creating the all-essential groove in the master, the cutter head moves in a straight line from the outside to the inside… in other words it's always at a tangent to the groove it's cutting. Therefore, if you wish to recreate the *exact* movement of the cutter head, you would need the phono cartridge at the end of a tonearm to follow the exact same straight line from the outside of an LP to the inside.

Some tonearms do exactly this, by means of being physically moved along a rail: Such tonearms are known as 'tangential tracking' types because they allow the phono cartridge's stylus to trace the LP at the groove's tangent. Buying a tangential tracking tonearm is not difficult — they're readily available from manufacturers including Clearaudio, Reed, Kuzma, Schröder, Goldmund and others. It is, however, expensive to buy one, with prices ranging from $5,000 to $35,000.

> “E.A.T’s F-Note tonearm is not only long, it’s also completely adjustable...”

Tangential tracking arms come with baggage, however, because implementing the tangential movement (whether it’s done mechanically or by means of an air-bearing) invariably involves compromises that can result in tracking errors. Installation and maintenance of tangential tracking arms can also be complex and time-consuming and your choice of phono cartridge is usually limited.

By comparison with any type of tangential tracking tonearm, a conventional pivoted tonearm is simplicity itself, the only issue being that because the arm is pivoted at a single point, the stylus moves in an arc across the LP’s surface, so it will always have an angular error compared to the orientation of the original cutting stylus. (There are two points where there is no error, but we’ll disregard these for the purpose of this explanation.)

But let us imagine, for a moment, that we had tonearm that was one thousand metres long, so the pivot point was a full kilometre from the turntable platter. The stylus of a phono cartridge fitted to the end of such an arm would still scribe an arc across the surface of the LP, but that arc would be so shallow that it would be almost indistinguishable from a straight line drawn from the circumference to the spindle. If we had an infinitely long tonearm, it would deliver, to all intents and purposes, the tangential tracking ideal.

The foregoing hypothetical reveals why longer tonearms are better than shorter ones. And if you think about it carefully, you should now also realise why so many turntable manufacturers use short arms on their turntables despite the fact they’re well aware that such arms are not ideal: It’s because the longer the tonearm, the further the pivot point needs to be from the spindle and therefore the larger the turntable base needs to be, which in turn means added manufacturing costs, increased shipping costs and reduced ‘partner acceptance factor’.

E.A.T.’s F-Note tonearm is not only long, it’s also completely adjustable, so that you can adjust for cartridge overhang and azimuth, along with skating compensation (via a complex string and weighted-lever arrangement, about which more later). To help you with azimuth alignment E.A.T. has built a laser into the F-Note which projects beams onto the rear of the finger-lift. The laser assembly attaches magnetically to the arm tower, so it can be removed once alignment is complete. As for the power for the laser, that’s supplied not by the turntable itself, but by a battery inside the laser assembly. The F-Note tonearm on my review sample was finished in black anodised aluminium alloy, but a polished aluminium version is also available.

You can also option in a different tonearm entirely, should you wish, with the obvious candidate being E.A.T.’s own carbon-fibre C-Note tonearm. Unlike the F-Note, which is available only as a 12-inch version, the C-Note is available in 12-inch, 10-inch and 9-inch versions. Another option is the E.A.T. E-Go tonearm, which is also a 12-inch arm, but is made in the USA for E.A.T. by Graham Engineering. It’s a magnetically-controlled uni-pivot design based on GE’s Phantom II supreme model.

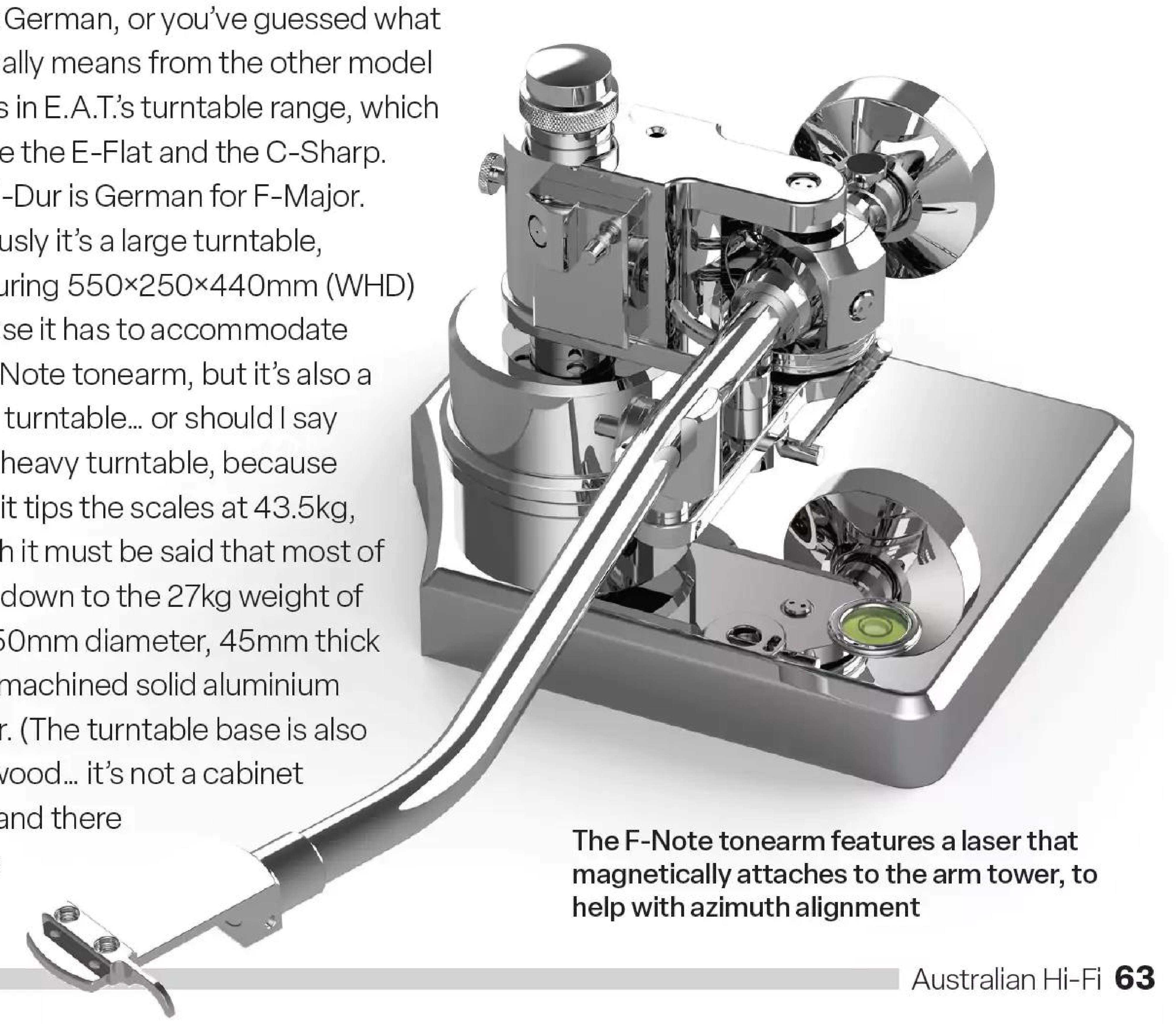
F-DUR TURNTABLE

The model name of this E.A.T. turntable model name seems strange unless you speak German, or you’ve guessed what it actually means from the other model names in E.A.T.’s turntable range, which include the E-Flat and the C-Sharp. Yep, F-Dur is German for F-Major. Obviously it’s a large turntable, measuring 550×250×440mm (WHD) because it has to accommodate the F-Note tonearm, but it’s also a heavy turntable... or should I say a *very* heavy turntable, because all-up it tips the scales at 43.5kg, though it must be said that most of this is down to the 27kg weight of the 350mm diameter, 45mm thick CNC-machined solid aluminium platter. (The turntable base is also solid wood... it’s not a cabinet type, and there are no internal voids to be found here.)

Having such a heavy platter improves the stability of the rotational speed of the platter, but would normally put considerable stress on the platter bearing. In the F-Dur, E.A.T. has alleviated this stress by eliminating most of the weight on the bearing by using neodymium magnets to suspend the platter above the plinth. It’s not a complete magnetic bearing, like the one in the Mag-Lev turntable, but it does remove most of the pressure on the main bearing. That bearing is an inverted type with a lubricated ceramic ball.

As you can see from the photographs accompanying this review, the F-Dur is a twin-motor dual belt-drive design, which is one that’s favoured by E.A.T., but unlike some E.A.T. models, which use silicon-string drive belts of different lengths, the two drive belts on the F-Dur are equally long. The two drive motors are AC types, but use AC regenerated from DC to enable better speed control and electronic speed change (but only between 33.33 and 45-rpm... the higher — but admittedly rare — 78-rpm speed is not available).

Every E.A.T. F-Dur comes with a ‘Quality Control Declaration’ that includes a personal note from E.A.T.’s founder, owner and CEO, Jozefina Lichtenegger, certifying that all E.A.T. products are “*handmade in our specialised European factories by trained individuals selected for their craftsmanship and technical ability.*” She further states that each and every product from E.A.T.’s high-



The F-Note tonearm features a laser that magnetically attaches to the arm tower, to help with azimuth alignment

The setup process for the E.A.T F-Dur can be incredibly complex. Getting a professional installation would be a wise move.

end range is put through full mechanical and electrical tests and finished with quality control checks that include running the turntable continuously for 8 hours, along with a complete listening test to *"ensure it meets our exacting standards"*. The declaration also includes a ten-point check-box quality control sheet signed (and countersigned) by two E.A.T. specialists.

The QC declaration also says that *"to get the most out of your new product we encourage you to read your User Manual fully before unpacking and installing it"* which would have been great if such reading matter had been included with my review unit. (It wasn't.) Fortunately (or by design) it was an easy matter to download the User Manual from the European Audio Teams' website.

Mains power is supplied to the E.A.T. F-Dur via a stand-alone switch-mode power supply (made in China) that outputs 15vdc and connects via a custom four-pin plug, not the usual connector used for direct current.

INSTALLATION AND OPERATION

If I were asked whether you should "unpack and install" (and calibrate!) the E.A.T. F-Dur turntable and F-Note tonearm yourself, my answer would be that unless you are already "experienced in the art", you should not even consider it: Let an expert do it for you, not least because in my opinion, the instructions in the Owner's Manual are not complete enough, nor sufficiently detailed to enable easy self-installation. Also, various essential alignment tools are not included with the turntable, such as a tracking weight balance and a cartridge alignment protractor. There is also very little advice as to exactly how much lubrication should be present on the spindle.

> "I could not hear any traces of wow or flutter...it's audibly perfect!"

Although the Owner's Manual says all the alignment has been done for you, this is not strictly true because, in accordance with standard industry practise (and ordinary commonsense!), the tonearm counterweight is packaged separately, and must be installed by the user. This is actually a little tricky to do because there are no adjustment markings and it's very fiddly to get the down-force accurate, because the lock-nut for the counterweight is very low down, and very close to the weight itself.

You will also have to connect the anti-skating system, and I found this to be quite complex and fiddly the first time I did it, and only became easier once I'd had some practise (as a result of moving the turntable a few times during this review). E.A.T. appears to have foreseen some users may end up damaging and/or breaking the hair-thin nylon thread that transfers the tension from the anti-skating weight to the tonearm because it provides "spare" threads just in case. These spare threads are in the same zip-lock bag as the anti-skating weight, but they're almost invisible to the naked eye... so don't throw away the bag once you've removed the weight!

I was totally confused by the red line on the photograph in the Owners' Manual that is intended to show you the path for the anti-skating thread, because the path shown by the red line is not actually where the thread goes! I also found that the instructions for how to work the slider system were not particularly helpful to me... perhaps some meaning has been lost in the translation from German to English... or perhaps it was just me being particularly dim-witted! In my opinion, since the Owner's Manual includes several photographs of the tonearm mount, it would have made more sense to include a couple of close-up photographs of a correctly set-up anti-skating path in the manual rather than trying to illustrate it with dodgy hand-drawn red lines.

My review sample of the E.A.T. F-Dur came with one of E.A.T.'s own moving-coil cartridges already installed in the head-shell. According to the packaging that was included, this cartridge was a 'Jo No 5.1' but the printing on the cartridge itself was different: 'Jo No 5'. The body of this cartridge is very large and bulbous, so it's likely only going to be suitable for use in tonearms that are height-adjustable (which is the case with the F-Note).

As mentioned previously, the E.A.T. F-Note has a laser that attaches to the tonearm mount to help you align the vertical tracking angle of the stylus cantilever as well as the azimuth. Because of the high level of accuracy required, you will need to make sure that the surfaces of the laser assembly and the tonearm mount are absolutely spotless before installation to avoid a beam location error. Also, I would imagine that the laser alignment is unique to a specific cartridge — in this case the Jo 5.1 — because correct VTA alignment is very dependent on the dimensional attributes of the cartridge fitted to the tonearm, such as body depth and cantilever length. In any event, I bypassed this particular alignment step by using my own alignment protractor (Smartstylus made by German company Acoustical Systems) because this is the tool I am most familiar with.

The mass of the platter has one slight drawback, which is that it takes more than the usual amount of time to achieve the correct rotational speed, that time being 13 seconds if you're playing ordinary LPs and 22 seconds if you're playing an LP recorded at 45rpm. If you let the platter stop on its own (after having lifted the stylus from the LP) you'll then need to wait a long 25 seconds for it to eventually come to a complete halt.

Once the platter on the E.A.T. F-Dur reaches rotational speed, that speed remains steady as a rock. As usual, I checked speed accuracy with my strobe disc and the F-Dur was spot-on at both speeds. Not only was it spot on, but whereas there's always a tiny amount of movement — or 'hunting' — in the stroboscopic image, there was less than I can ever recall seeing previously, so I imagine that wow would be very low.

As distinct from looking at speed stability with the strobe disc, I used my usual go-to LPs to listen for speed stability... or, if you prefer, audible wow and flutter. I confess to pulling out the same old war-horses time after time in order to do this, those being Liszt's *Légende No 1 St François d'Assise*, Satie's *Gymnopédies*, Chopin's *Nocturne Op.27 No.1*, and John Field's *Nocturne No.10 in E minor*. All these are great for evaluating wow and flutter levels, but they're also enjoyable to listen to, so it's always a win-win when things go well. And in the case of the E.A.T. F-Dur, everything went more than well, because I could not hear any traces of wow or flutter… and you can't get a better result than that! It's audibly perfect.

Turntable bearing rumble is also something you don't want to hear, nor do you want to hear motor noise, and with two motors instead of just the one, I was wondering if E.A.T. might have been working with a handicap on the motor front, because two motors must create twice the noise of just the one.

I confess that I hate listening for rumble, because in my location it means I have to stay up very late — or set an early morning alarm — to ensure there is neither traffic noise nor environmental noise. The good news here is that post-Covid, this has become a great deal easier, because nights have definitely become quieter! Once again, the E.A.T. F-Dur came up trumps because I could not hear any noise from the motors, no rumble from the bearing and (not that I was expecting it, given the nature of the power supply) no mains hum. I have no doubt that magnetic force played a significant part in my not being able to hear any turntable rumble.

The single hiccup during my review was that the tonearm lifter on my review sample was a bit erratic about dropping. Most of the time it lowered the stylus into the groove smoothly, with the descent taking about 5 seconds. Sometimes, however, it would drop down smoothly for three seconds, then pause a second or two before completing its downward journey. Very, *very* rarely the pause was around 6–7 seconds, meaning that in these cases the complete cuing process took 11–12 seconds. Presumably this is some kind of simple adjustment, but unfortunately nothing covering this is mentioned in the Owner's Manual.

CONCLUSION

E.A.T.'s F-Dur is a superb turntable in every respect: Superb-looking, superbly quiet and superbly smooth, accurate rotation with no audible wow or flutter. Yes it's very large, but then it has to be in order to accommodate a 12-inch tonearm, and if you are serious about getting the best sound quality possible from LPs, using a 12-inch arm is absolutely essential. And when it comes to 12-inch arms, E.A.T.'s F-Note is a stand-out, both for its looks and its adjustability. **Greg Borrowman**

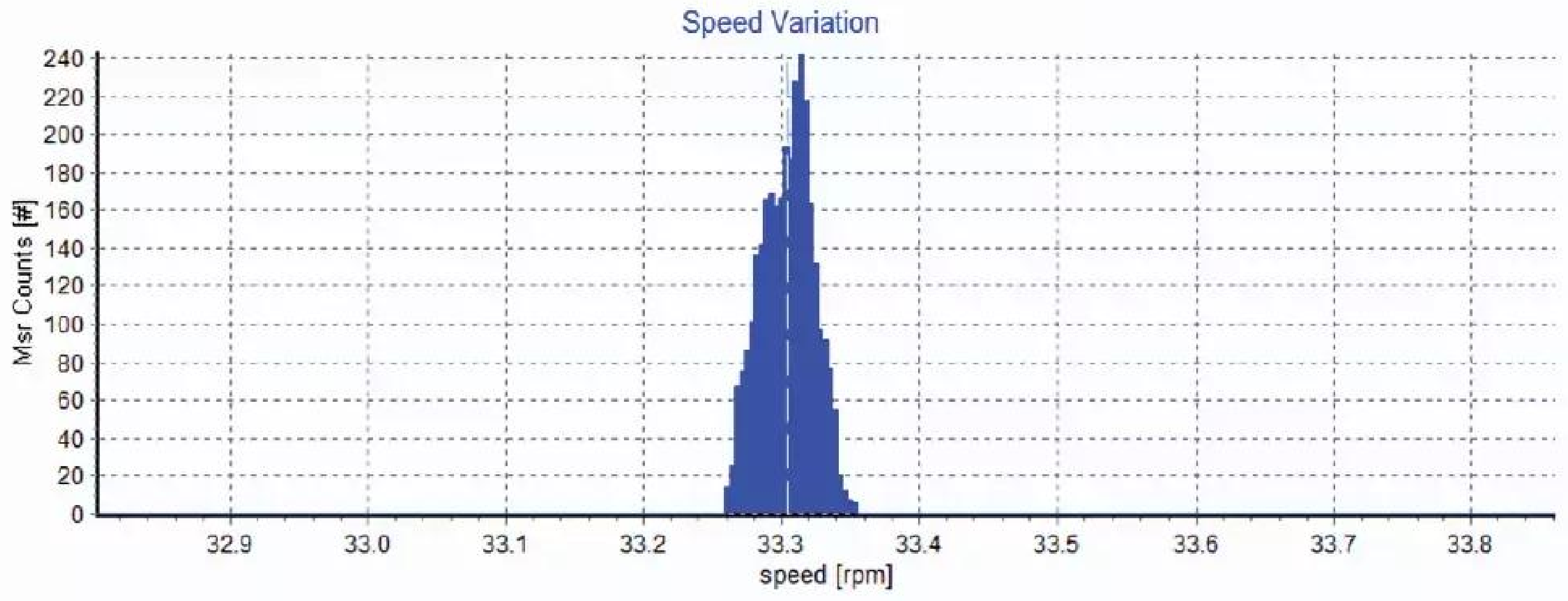
SPECS & CONTACT

Brand: E.A.T.
Model: F-Dur/F-Note
RRP: $18,999
Warranty: 2 Years

Distributor: Audio Active Australia
Address: 63 Fennell Street
Port Melbourne VIC 3207
T: (03) 9699 8900
E: info@audioactive.com.au
W: www.audioactive.com.au

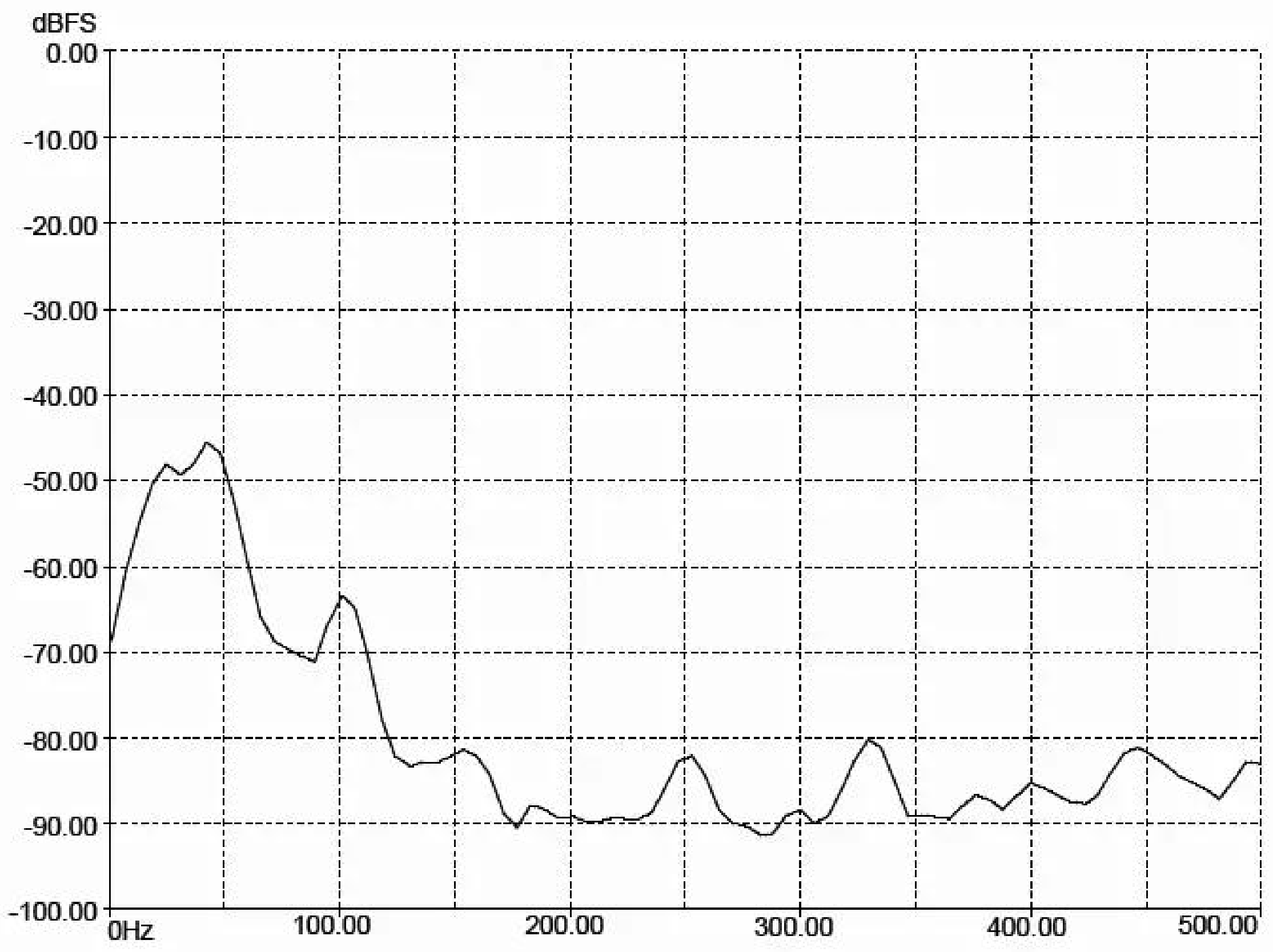
Laboratory Test Report

Readers interested in a full technical appraisal of the performance of the E.A.T. F-Dur Turntable should continue on and read the **LABORATORY REPORT** published on the following pages. Readers should note that the results mentioned in the report, tabulated in performance charts and/or displayed using graphs and/or photographs should be construed as applying only to the specific sample tested.



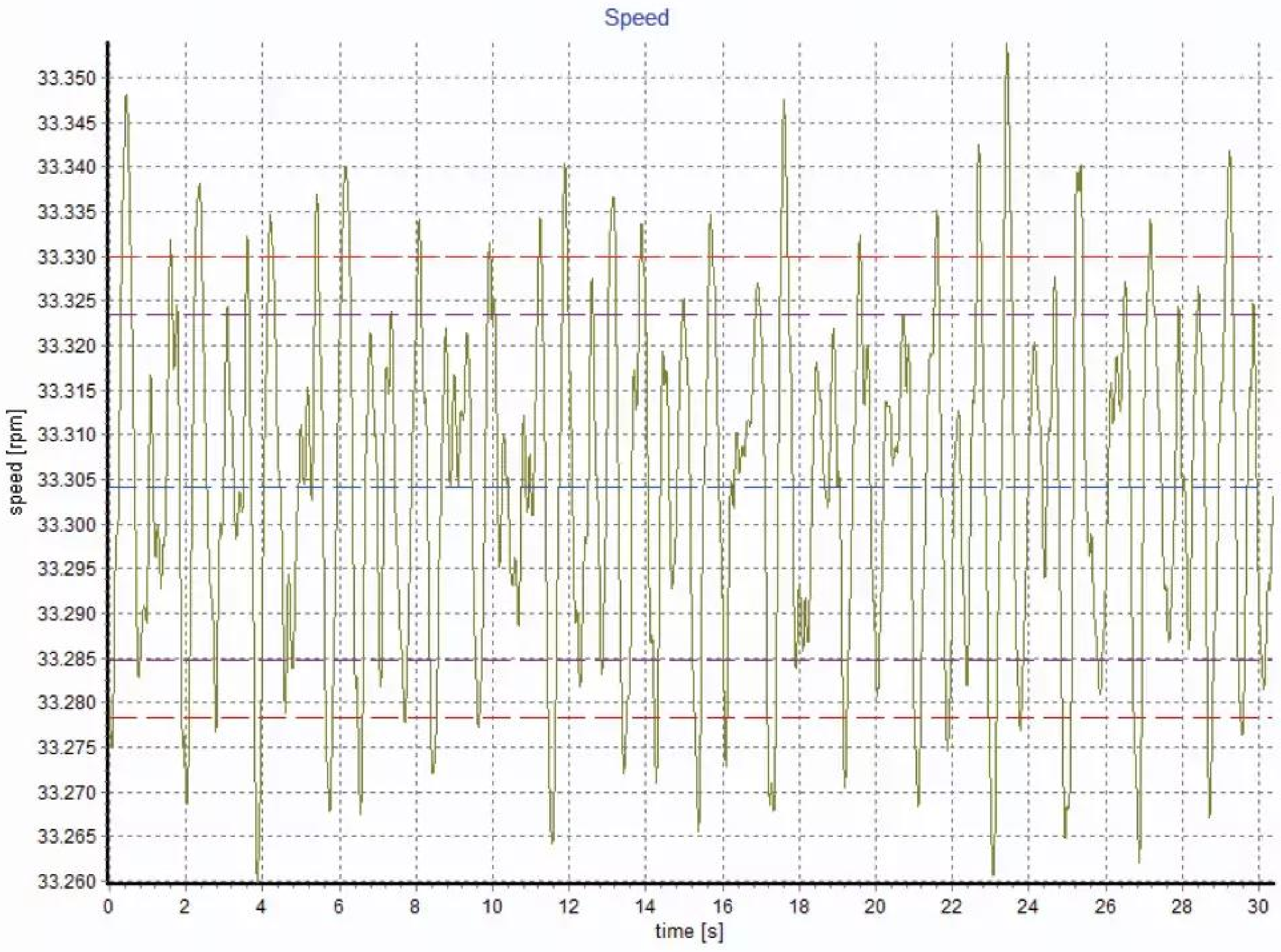
Newport Test Labs measured the rotational speed of the E.A.T. F-Dur turntable as being exact at 33.33 rpm and also at 45 rpm.

Measured wow and flutter was extremely low irrespective of rotational speed, with *Newport Test Labs* measuring 0.075% CCIR weighted, 0.07% DIN weighted and 0.07% RMS unweighted (all measured at 33.33 rpm). At 45 rpm, the lab measured wow and flutter at 0.07% CCIR weighted, 0.07% DIN weighted and 0.06% RMS unweighted.



Rumble was measured as being more than 70dB down, referenced to the level of a 1kHz signal recorded at 3.54cm/second.

Rumble re level of 1kHz signal with recorded velocity of 3.54cm/sec



The graph showing rumble vs. frequency shows that there's some mains-induced hum at 50Hz and 100Hz, but this could be partly a result of the high level of electrical activity in the laboratory environment. **Steve Holding**

The comeback continues...

Following an unveiling at the Australian Hi-Fi Show 2025 in Sydney in April earlier this year, Yamaha's duo of high-end headphones – the YH-4000 and YH-C3000 are now available to buy. The two pairs follow the highly acclaimed 'special edition' YH-5000SE the company released in 2023 in its surprise return to the head-fi market.

Yet, at $7,499, the YH-5000SE open-back over-ears are going to be out of the price bracket for many head-fi enthusiasts, and so fortunately the new models represent a more accessible route to the Yamaha's audiophile headphones market.

We were able to go ears-on with the YH-C3000 earlier this year, and you can read our full impressions of the talented set here, alongside all the info you need for the YH-4000.

THE FAMILIAR

First up we have the open-back YH-4000, which closely resemble the YH-5000SE

> These closed, solid earcups are what I can only describe as ‘orb-like’... each YH-C3000 housing takes over a week to make

both in terms of aesthetic and engineering, and simply introduce a few material-based changes.

The YH-5000SE were originally conceived as ‘Special Edition’ (hence ‘SE’ in the model name) headphones that would predate the launch of an identical ‘standard’ version that would forgo some of the bundled ‘SE’ accessories. Sure enough, the YH-4000 inherit many of the materials and design elements of its SE sibling, including an ultra-lightweight magnesium body, dual-layer headband and tilting swivel mechanism. They also, more importantly, adopt the YH-5000SE’s planet magnetic Orthodynamic drivers and large-capacity housings. And, rather than simply copy and paste, Yamaha has customised and fine-tuned the drivers specifically for the YH-4000 to “attain its unique, enhanced sound quality — delivering full power and volume in the low frequencies with a richly textured, dense and solid midrange”. Such customisations include deliberately omitting the sound absorbing material featured in the flagship model and choosing a specific filter made from a finely woven material with “ideal permeability to match the sound vision for the YH-4000”.

At the time of their unveiling earlier this year, I wasn’t sure which accessories (if any) Yamaha would bundle with the YH-4000. I now have confirmation that the headphones will ship with a silver-coated oxygen-free copper cable, alongside a semi-hard carry case. It seems there’s no spare set of ear pads, then!

I also wasn’t sure how much the YH-4000 would cost. This too has now been put to rest, with the new pair carrying a $3,999 price tag.

Considering how well the YH-5000SE were received, it isn’t surprising that the design has largely been kept. They quickly made a legacy for themselves, gaining a highly favourable review in *Australian Hi-Fi* magazine (issue #529, page 30) before winning the Temptation Award at our sister magazine, *What Hi-Fi?*. As Yamaha’s first high-end wired headphones in three decades, they very much succeed as ambitious and modern reimaginings of the company’s very first headphones, the HP-1, from the mid-1970s.

THE FRESH

The most exciting model, for its freshness at least, is the YH-C3000 (‘C’ = ‘closed-back’), which I borrowed an early production sample of in the weeks leading up to the Australian Hi-Fi Show in April.

Naturally, the YH-C3000 look pretty different to the open-back designs, which are aesthetically defined by the intricate spider pattern of the earcups’ open, lightweight magnesium structure. These closed, solid earcups are what I can only call ‘orb-like’ — round, glossy and black — and look, in my mind, more traditional and less aesthetically divisive than the rather industrial-looking spider design.

They are made of wood, specifically German beech. Yamaha has a storied history with wood craft, of course, with its factory in the north of Japan, the Yamaha Music Craft AKITA (YMCA), having manufactured wood for its pianos and other musical instruments for more than seven decades. Indeed, the YH-C3000 supposedly shares similarities with the bodywork of Yamaha guitars.

The team settled on beech wood after testing various types, including rosewood, African mahogany and sycamore, and also benefited from the company’s specialist skills in drying wood for its pianos.

The ridge of the earcup housing and around the brand’s emblem is carved, shaved and sanded by hand, with the finishing process alone — colouring, sanding and polishing — repeated five times to produce the desired effect. It’s little wonder that each YH-C3000 housing takes over a week to make!

And a further nod to Yamaha’s distinguished musical instrument career: the inner red-ish colour of the low-repulsion silk protein inside the earcups is the same colour you see upon opening a Yamaha piano. The YH-C3000 feel as lovely as they look, though a word of caressing caution: the finish is, to my mild frustration at least, a fingerprint magnet. Fortunately, Yamaha bundles a wipe cloth into the package, but if you’re an Instagram user, good luck taking photos of them without your phone or concentration face shining back at you in the reflective finish. Of course, this mirror-like glossy black screams ‘Yamaha’, specifically the brand’s iconic pianos and motorbikes. I read one *Head-Fi* forum user liken the earcups to the headlights of the Yamaha R1 bike, and they aren’t wrong.

Our review’s description of the YH-5000SE as feeling “beautifully engineered”, “built with obvious care” and “one of the

Each wooden earcup is sanded, coloured and polished five times

The whole drive unit with the housing around the diaphragm

Three composite layers are compressed to form a one-piece diaphragm

most comfortable pairs of headphones we've worn" can be appropriately used for the YH-C3000 too, with the closed earcup construction only adding to the sense of solidity.

The rest of the physical structure seems mostly similar — the headband, slider and swivel material and function are the same as YH-5000SE — though the 'hanger' is aluminium rather than magnesium this time, and the leather earpads are different.

It's pretty impressive that Yamaha has managed to produce a closed-back design only 10g heavier than the YH-5000SE, at 330g. That compares favourably to established high-end pairs such as the Focal Stellia (435g), Beyerdynamic T5 (350g) and Audio-Technica ATH-AWKT (405g), and is a practical Godsend for those who revel in long listening sessions. In the couple of hours they donned my head without removal, they never felt burdensome to wear.

It's beneath this handcrafted construction where the real magic lies, though. Having sown the seed for a new rigid yet lightweight driver with a pre-layered, triple-layer diaphragm back in 2010, Yamaha's team have now produced that all-new drive unit, which makes its debut in the YH-C3000.

It's called the Armodynamic driver, the name taken from 'Armonia', which in music vocabulary references harmonym after the name of the Greek goddess of harmony, Harmonia. And it did indeed emerge 15 years after its initial conception as a triple-layer structure, with the three layers compressed together to form one diaphragm piece using an apparently highly tricky manufacturing technique honed by Yamaha. Specifically, a composite layer of Zylon, paper and resin sandwiches a composite layer of foaming resin, paper and resin.

Plugged first into my Chord Hugo 2

Which to back: open or closed?

Open-back headphones don't have an enclosure behind their drivers, which means that sound is fired both towards and away from the listener's ears. Therefore, if you sit next to anyone using a pair of open-back headphones, the chances are that you'll have no problem hearing their music, albeit with a thin and tinny tone. You'd be hearing the sound being fired away from the listener's ears and out of the headphone's ear cups (which often have holes for that sound to escape through). Similarly, there is little sense of isolation from the environment, and you can hear almost everything around you. Want to enjoy open-back headphones on a bus, train or plane? Good luck. These are certainly headphones better enjoyed in the quiet privacy of your own home, where noisy distractions are limited.

A closed-back pair, however, has that enclosure behind the drivers, with the sound that's fired away from your ears hitting the earcup, although many designs attempt to negate the distortion caused by this effect to ensure most of the sound is still focused on hitting your ears. This, naturally, prevents excessive sound leakage from your headphones.

Why do some manufacturers still persist in making open-back designs if they're so useless at isolating you from outside noise, rarely offer noise-cancelling capabilities and leak sound like a broken sieve? Well, as you might have guessed, there are some important advantages when it comes to sound quality, with the lack of an enclosure behind the drive unit meaning that the rearward-firing sound is free to escape more easily.

In a closed design, this sonic energy would be trapped and excite resonances in the enclosure, causing unwanted noise. This is sound you don't want, and it overlays that made by the drive unit. The result is a loss of clarity, transparency and resolution. Also, there is a good chance that any sound bouncing around inside that closed enclosure could work its way back out through the drive unit diaphragm and add to its output — again, detrimental to sound quality.

It doesn't end there, either. The inherent springiness in the trapped air behind the driver could restrict the movement of the diaphragm during larger excursions, which would affect the way the headphones render the music's dynamics and limit performance at higher volume levels.

When it comes to pure sound quality, open-back designs hold most of the aces. Open designs are often so much more dynamically expressive and generally emotive than their rivals, with a clearer, more revealing and more expressive sound that will delight anyone who likes to feel the emotion and excitement of their music. They're usually more spacious, too, with a wider sonic canvas that benefits from a pleasing sense of instrumental separation that, as I've aptly said before, feels less 'in your own head'.

Comfort can also be helped by an open design. Ears heat up less over extended listening sessions, while the lack of an enclosure offers the potential for reduced weight.

Open-back designs don't hold all of the aces when it comes to sound, though. The inclusion of an enclosed design generally adds greater sonic muscularity to the equation, especially in the bass department. They also tend to sound more solid and substantial as a result, with many listeners preferring the muscularity and weight of a closed pair. Combine that with their portability and ease of use, and it's little wonder that closed-backs are the choice for most people in this increasingly portable world. Ultimately, which design is right for you depends on your sonic preferences and where you plan on using them.

> In my notes when listening to Public Service Broadcasting, I'd simply written 'bubble of energy'. 'Fun' and 'astute'...

DAC and then the more price-comparable Yamaha HA-L7A headphone amplifier, the YH-C3000 certainly share a similar sonic character to their siblings — one that is utterly clear, straight down the middle tonally, and highly expressive across the board.

It wasn't surprising to hear a slightly more closed-in soundstage, just as it wasn't a shock how much punchier and more solid these sounded in comparison. That tends to be the sonic nature of closed designs, after all.

I'm personally a fan of the 'open-back sound' (one typically defined by notable spaciousness, impeccable transparency and dynamic expression), but listening to the YH-C3000 I found it easy to appreciate the value of absolute muscularity and weight. The conviction behind each varied percussive element in Jamie xx's 'It's So Good'; how effectively the tectonic droning backdrop anchors Oneohtrix Point Never & Iggy Pop's 'The Pure And The Damned', and the depth of Iggy's spoken vocals above it; and the drive and defintion behind the bassline that rhythmically underpins The Goon Sax's 'In The Stone'... it's all utterly captivating, even at lower volumes.

On very few occasions have I heard the piano playing throughout Eluvium's 'Prelude For Time Feelers' conveyed with as much dynamic perception, and despite a lesser sense of airiness, nothing sounds like it's struggling for room or coherency as strings and horns head in various directions to convolute the composition.

In my notes when listening to Public Service Broadcasting, I'd simply written 'bubble of energy'. 'Fun' and 'astute' seem like good adjectives to leave on.

This is by no means a review but simply early impressions based on a pre-production pair. Further listening using a range of partnering kit, compared next to those aforementioned rivals, and of course with a full production model, will paint a more complete picture. Hopefully that picture will be painted in the not-too-distant future. If you want to get a head start of your own, then the Yamaha YH-C3000 are available now for $2,999. **Becky Roberts**

Fyne Audio's Dr. Paul Mills:

"We believe speakers should be accurate but also entertaining"

The Scottish speaker brand's technical director speaks to Ketan Bharadia about his hi-fi career and the intricacies of speaker design

Scottish speaker brand Fyne Audio was founded in 2017 and was made available to buy here in Australia from late-September 2019 by way of Melbourne-based distributor, HiFi Collective. The company's speakers have performed well under test by my *What Hi-Fi?* colleagues and now our sister magazine's technical director, Ketan Bharadia, has had the chance to speak with Fyne Audio's technical director, Dr. Paul Mills during a visit to the company's factory, based just outside of Glasgow, Scotland.

Dr. Mills has been the man responsible for the development and engineering of the company's speakers since its founding and before that, he performed the same role at Tannoy, where he worked for three decades, designing many of the brand's iconic models. Read on to find about his career highlights, his reference system and his favourite speakers...

KB: How did you first get interested in hi-fi?

Dr. Paul Mills: I was interested in music from a young age. In my early teens I got into building amplifiers, which allowed me to put together a music system somewhat better than the one my parents had. My interest in music and hi-fi led me to do a Bachelor of Engineering (BEng) degree.

After I finished that degree, I ended up working in a totally different industry, designing power and control systems. So I got a bit of high-power electronics experience there.

Then I learnt about the Audio Research and Engineering PHD course at Essex University, where Professor Malcolm Hawksford worked. I applied and was accepted. The title of my thesis was 'Active Loudspeaker Systems with Transconductance Amplification'.

I stayed on at Essex after that, teaching electronics for around five years. I then got a couple of opportunities: to join Celestion in Ipswich or Tannoy in Scotland.

I chose Tannoy because I had some of its Dual Concentric drivers — big 12-inch things — which were excellent, and I was kind of hooked on the Dual Concentric idea. But I also chose Tannoy for the quality of life in Scotland compared to that in the south of England. That was around 1989.

KB: What was the first Tannoy product you worked on?

Dr. Mills: It was the update to the company's Planet Series – you know, the Mercury, Jupiter and so on. I worked on the aluminium tweeter to replace the previous soft domes. At the same time, I also helped in the final tweaking of the Westminster Royals.

During my 30 years I was responsible for countless Tannoy speakers – and not just residential but also some of the passive and active studio monitors as well.

KB: What is Fyne Audio's engineering philosophy?

Dr. Mills: In terms of engineering, we are very much committed to the 'point source' principle, where the acoustic centres of both the tweeter and mid/bass are in the same place.

So no matter how much you move off-axis, you've got this perfectly time-aligned source, where everything is still phase coherent. This also leads to a greater tonal accuracy and a wider listening sweet spot.

Compare that to a conventional discrete speaker, where the tweeter and mid/bass units are separate... such a design can only be accurate at one point in space, due to the path lengths from the two transducers, and as you move away from that one point, everything becomes misaligned.

You get errors in the phase response, and this means that you can no longer maintain the harmonic relationship of real instruments. Everything is out of sync.

You also get frequency response errors, which can occur not just in the crossover region but also higher up because of the drive unit misalignment.

We also try to design speakers that are enjoyable to listen to. We believe speakers should be accurate but also entertaining. A lot of speakers aren't fun because somehow the life has been engineered out of them.

Speakers should be able to play any kind of music, from classical to refined acoustic jazz to heavy rock.

KB: What is the ideal speaker enclosure material?

Dr. Mills: Birch ply. It's a slow-growing wood, so it's dense. The material's less homogeneous nature means that any colourations are spread, rather than concentrated as they are with conventional MDF/HDF cabinets.

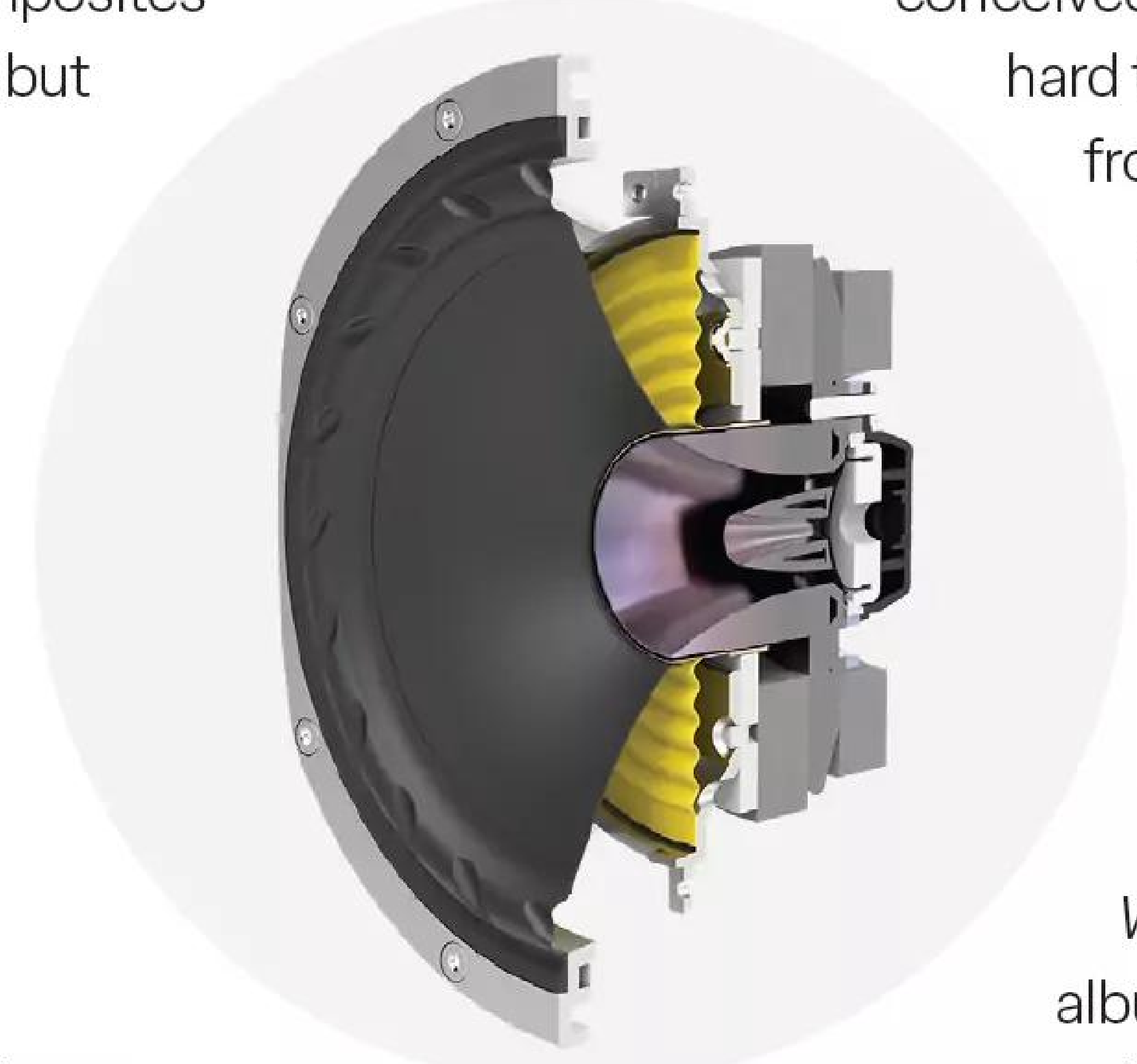
The use of metals in cabinets isn't something that we have explored to any great extent. People use metal cabinets because of the material's mass and rigidity, and they are trying to engineer colouration out of the speaker.

It's an expensive technique as you need to use some pretty heavyweight panels so that they don't ring. Even if the level of resonance is low, the area of the enclosure is still large and will radiate energy. That sound is metallic in nature, as you would expect.

A curved cabinet shape is generally better as it helps break up internal standing waves. These are more difficult to control in a rectangular box. A curved design reduces colouration and provides the opportunity for more visually interesting shapes.

KB: How about drive unit materials?

Dr. Mills: There are lots of exotic materials. You can use lots of composites of various descriptions but we found that a good old-fashioned paper cone, correctly designed, has a naturalness about it that those other materials don't beat.



KB: What is your reference system?

Dr. Mills: We have different reference systems, depending on the price point of the speakers. It would be a bit daft to use a stupidly expensive amplifier and CD player with budget designs, so we use appropriate partnering equipment for the product we are working on.

We have a Rega Aethos amplifier for more affordable things. A lot of our dealers in the UK and throughout Europe are Rega dealers too. At the top end, we tend to use Accuphase.

In our test room, we have Accuphase's 50-watt E800S Class A integrated amplifier and its DP-770 CD player. We share a fair few distributors with Accuphase in the Far East and tend to do shows with them in Hong Kong, China and various other places. There's a synergy, too, in that Accuphase uses our F1-12S as the reference speakers in its listening room.

KB: What music do you test with?

Dr. Mills: Oh, gosh, that's… a difficult one. I like so many genres of music. Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* is pretty good actually. It's just so well conceived and recorded, but it's hard to pick just one track from it. *Liberty* by Annette Askvik is a superbly recorded album. Her voice is gorgeous. Some of the Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays stuff is also very good. A good introduction is the *Works* compilation album. It's on the ECM record label, and they do some fantastic recordings.

KB: Of the speakers you've developed, which is your favourite?

Dr. Mills: It would have to be the [Fyne Audio] F1-12, I think, because of its breadth of abilities. It's a big speaker and has a very extended low-frequency range.

The cabinet design, being both curved and birch ply, gives it very low colouration. It's our flagship speaker.

But you would have to include our SuperTrax super tweeter, which not only extends the frequency response but, being an omnidirectional device, adds to the phase coherence and improves dispersion.

Everybody needs a super tweeter. When you get used to it, and then it's taken away, you suddenly realise what's missing.

KB: Speaker technology is generally mature. Where do you see scope for advancement?

Dr. Mills: There are always new materials and manufacturing techniques to be explored. You have to be very careful with materials, as just because something is high-tech, nano-technology or composite, that doesn't necessarily mean it will sound good.

We are all for exploring new technologies in terms of driver cones, tweeter materials and also cabinets. However, there's no point in having something that's ridiculously high-tech if it doesn't produce musically satisfying results. You've thrown the baby out with the bath water.

KB: What kind of speakers do you think we will be listening to in 30 years?

Dr. Mills: Probably none. Perhaps we will have brain implants to get music directly into the grey matter…

Bush

I Beat Loneliness

earMUSIC

Between new releases from Skunk Anansie, Garbage, Pulp and Suede, the (already tedious) live return of Oasis, and baggy jeans and plaid shirts making a pleasingly comfy comeback, the 90s are back with aplomb in 2025, much to the delight and slight age-related horror of those of us whose misspent youth traversed that decade. So Bush should slot straight back in with *I Beat Loneliness*, their tenth album, and sixth since they re-formed in 2010. And yet, largely because they were always more successful in the US than their UK homeland, they remain on the outside of it all, their sound still tailored to the American radio stations that made them millionaires.

Wisely, they've chosen to keep on doing what they know the best – indeed, what they've been doing since their debut *Sixteen Stone* hit in 1994 – and the first half of the record churns out one blustery grunge rocker after another. But keeping a musical theme together makes a lot of sense when the lyrical journey starts to reveal itself, frontman Gavin Rossdale delving into an exploration of self-harm, mental health struggles, recovery, survival and the urge to reach out a helping hand to anyone else who might be struggling. The latter lightens the load on the songs, Rossdale's deep, sometimes doomy vocals taking on a slightly brighter note when the search for hope comes to the forefront. Side A is very much business as usual, then, aimed firmly at the fans who've stuck with Bush over the past three decades and know exactly what they want from the band. It's when we hit side two that things get a little bit more inventive, turning a corner on 'We Are Of This Earth', which brings things down a notch with a dreamy, spacey, mournful little bit of echoing shoegaze. It's a moment of beauty that gives pause for thought and paves the way for the raw honesty of 'Everyone Is Broken', a stripped-back, gentle call for kindness and solidarity, with sweet gang vocals in the chorus driving home the idea of all of us being in this messy old life together.

It's not the most ambitious record in the world – at this stage in their career Bush don't seem to be trying to capture a new audience or to chase the zeitgeist – but *I Beat Loneliness* does give the impression of a band reaching out to the listeners they know are already there and offering the comfort of emotional understanding and musical familiarity.

Joe Bonamassa

Breakthrough

J&R ADVENTURES

With more than 50 albums to his credit this century and a relentless touring schedule, you have to wonder how long Joe Bonamassa can keep it up. But on this, his seventeenth solo studio album, there's no let-up in standards, from the opening anthemic title track to the biting 'I'll Take The Blame', the funked up 'Drive By The Exit Sign', the emotionally drenched blues of 'Broken Record', the contrasting acoustic gentility of 'Shake This Ground', or the piledriving 'You Don't Own Me'.

The secret, it seems, is in the tweaking. Bonamassa knows what he's good at and doesn't stray from the parameters. But he's also a master of making small adjustments that keep the momentum rolling. This time round it's on the songs, using co-writers including Tom Hambridge and James House to beef up his own inexhaustible supply. That in turn creates a different setting for his signature solos to fly.

Atom Juice

Atom Juice

HEAVY PSYCH SOUNDS

Wake up and smell the patchouli, people, because Atom Juice, a psych/prog band from Poland, are fully dedicated to the retro world, and it's riding in on a wave of deep grooves and immersive, swirling guitars creating a vortex to lose yourself in for an hour of spaced exploration.

The influence of Pink Floyd at their dreamiest looms large over this debut album, with its dense layers of sound creating that elusively comfortable numbness, and heavier garage-rock peaks on the likes of 'Duo' adding a pleasing crunch to proceedings. It's perfect for blocking out the noise of the modern world and floating back to a simpler, more analogue place in the universe.

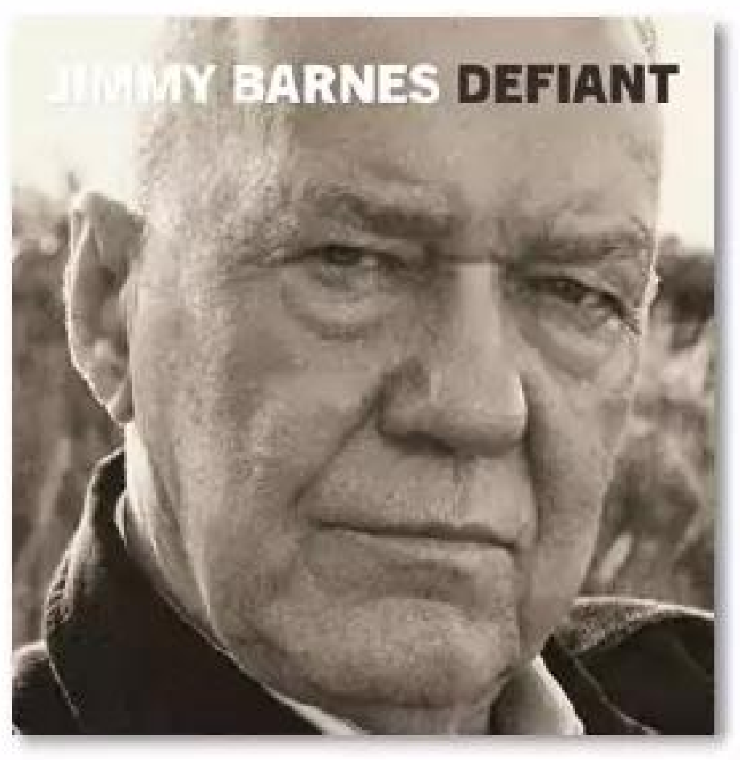
Kill The Robot

Kill The Robot

DARK LAB

Kill The Robot's self-titled debut is very much a release of two halves. Led by guitarist and synth player Stephen Gibb — who once played shows with Slayer, Anthrax and his Bee Gee dad Barry within a 24-hour period — and augmented by singer Gil Bitton, bassist Gordon Myers and Jean-Pierre Espiritusanto on drums, this 10-song collection appears to be evolving in real time as the influence of 80s synth-pop gives way to crunchier neo-prog stylings.

Early on, 'See The World' reaches for the heights of Dream Academy's 'Life In A Northern Town' but alights somewhere in the Midlands, while 'Summer Days' evokes spike-haired endorser of jumpers Howard Jones. But all is not lost. Kill The Robot find their voice with the driving 'No13ise', which ramps up Gibb's fretwork to display a heavier and more satisfying side of the band. Likewise the creeping menace of 'Drug', which also points to where they could be headed next.



Jimmy Barnes

Defiant

MUSHROOM MUSIC

As anyone familiar with his outstanding memoirs will know, Jimmy Barnes has led a challenging life. Recently, the 69-year-old has grappled with potentially fatal health issues. His response was to don the metaphorical boxing gloves and make a record titled *Defiant*.

Fans of the Scottish-born Australian can probably guess what it sounds like. Produced by longtime collaborator Kevin 'Caveman' Shirley, these 10 tracks run the gamut of Barnes' chosen styles – blues, soul, R&B, Americana and good ol' pub rock (Oz-style) — but this time there's even more consistency than usual.

Still belted out in ruinously gravelly tones, 'That's What You Do For Love' will resonate with those who still worship at the altar of Barnes' 1987 album *Freight Train Heart*, thanks to contributions from Joe Bonamassa, Journey's Jonathan Cain, Jason Bonham and Barnes' daughter Mahalia – and that's just the opening track. Defiant is a lesson in how to conquer life's setbacks.

australian
hi-fi
MARKET PLACE

10 REASONS

to buy at a Hi-Fi Shop

**Your local Hi-Fi shop is passionate about sound.
Why risk your music with anyone else?**

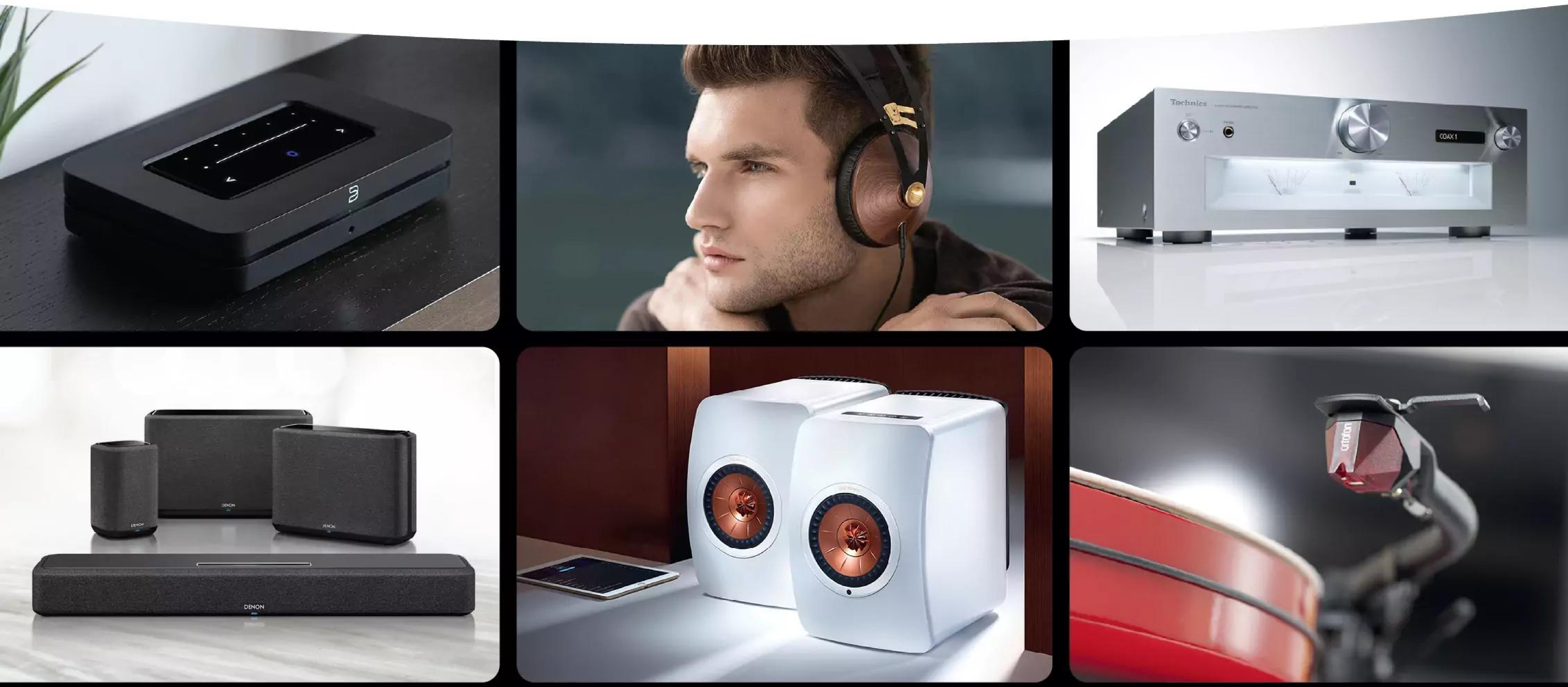
	☺ **The Hi-Fi Shop**	😐 **The Chain Store**	☹ **The Internet**
1	Talk to people with years or decades of hi-fi knowledge	Talk to people with days or even weeks of hi-fi knowledge	No people
2	Receive reliable personal advice	Bit of a lottery on the advice front	No advice
3	Expect to be asked about your needs and music	Expect to be asked about your budget	No filtering questions
4	Listen in a room environment before you buy	Listen over a noisy shop floor if you can listen at all	No listening
5	Have a nice coffee	There's a coffee shop three doors down in the Mall, mate	Make your own
6	Purchase with pride	Purchase in ignorance	Purchase with fear
7	Get a full warranty with local return point	Be offered an extended warranty you probably don't need	Warranty possibly void in Australia
8	After-sales service	After-sales what?	After-sales what?
9	Have an ongoing relationship	Rarely the same staff twice	No contact with staff
10	Relax and enjoy fine music	Relax and enjoy your mass-market bargain	Purchase and pray

LOCAL HI-FI SHOPS. The right place for the right sound.

We are the longest established Hi Fi business in the same location in Sydney. All of our products are genuine Australian stock with Australian manufacturer's warranty.

SINCE 1969
APOLLO
HI FI AND VIDEO CENTRE

Visit us at 283 Victoria Rd, Marrickville NSW 2204
P 1300 MY HIFI 1300 694 434
E sales@apollohifi .com.au
W www.apollohifi .com.au



A WORLD OF HOME ENTERTAINMENT

BLUESOUND | BOWERS & WILKINS | DALI | DENON | ELAC | KEF | KLIPSCH | MARANTZ | MOFI | PRO-JECT | REGA | TECHNICS | WHARFEDALE | WIIM & MORE

Audiophile Reference Recordings

Experience Australia's **ONLY** Audiophile Music Store – Since 2011

Audiophile Reference Recordings has been operating since 2011 and carries the biggest collection of carefully selected audiophile quality recordings (both vinyl records and CDs) of all genres in Australia. Every item is new and we also stock all things to help you improve your experience with vinyl...

COME AND VISIT US AT OUR STORE IN NUNAWADING!

29 Worrell Street,
Nunawading Victoria 3131
Telephone: 0411 261 822
Telephone orders are welcome

OPENING HOURS

Tue to Fri: 12.00 noon – 6.00pm
Sat: 10.00am – 4.00pm
Sun, Mon, Public Holidays: Closed

Visit us online at any time: **www.audiophilereferencerecordings.com.au**

Sound Gallery
When you are passionate about music

SOUND GALLERY PROUDLY PRESENTS

Accuphase

Accuphase E 5000
Designed to commemorate our 40th Anniversary the Accuphase E 5000 Integrated Amplifer is the Champagne of Audio Excellence

SOOTHING.
EXCITING.
EXHILARATING.

MUSIC CAN MOVE OUR HEARTS AND ENRICH OUR LIVES, WHICH IS THE GOAL WE AT ACCUPHASE SEEK THROUGH AUDIO TECHNOLOGY.

Experience the wide range of Accuphase's audio components at Sound Gallery.

precision SA-CD transport DP-1000
precision MDSD digital processor DC-1000

Accuphase DP-1000 & DC-1000
SA-CD Transport Accuphase and MDSD Digital Processor, each the culmination of Accuphase's 50-year pursuit of creating the ideal audio components

SOUND GALLERY
P 03 9578 8658 | M 0403 368 755
Visit us 225-229 Koornang Road, Carnegie VIC 3163
info@soundgallery.com.au | www.soundgallery.com.au

SCAN TO SEE MORE OF OUR WORLD LEADING BRANDS

SpectraFlora

Aphelia 8

www.spectraflora.com

The ultimate grounding solution developed for top-tier audio enthusiasts.

Telos' **EARTH GROUNDING MONSTER**, **active** grounding technology...
delivering the ultimate in audio system grounding.

Brand New Special Customized 630v High Voltage Tin Foil Duelund CAST

Customized 40W Core Power Transformer

4 sets of QMT broadband electromagnetic field demagnetizer/harmonizer modules

12 hole sites WBT-0703 CU Nextgen separate ground terminals and separate ground lines

"...the Telos Monster brings something truly important to your audio system it is almost impossible to get anywhere else. ...it's very, very, very good indeed." **Roy Gregory, Gy8.**

GROOVE WORKS Australia Pty Ltd

GrooveWorks Australia Pty Ltd
Phone: 0414 755 960
Email: grooveworks@dcsi.net.au

www.telos-audio.com.tw

Class A Audio

The Hi End Audio Experts

For the past 20 years we have been providing the best advice and service for Hi End Audio & Visual Sales, Installation and repairs, working with our customers to get them best possible products at the best possible price!

REL ACOUSTICS LTD. · vitus audio · TRANS ROTOR · LUXMAN · Accuphase · MAGICO · Harbeth XD · AUDIOVECTOR

Scan for all our world-class brands ▸

8/585 Blackburn Road · Notting Hill VIC · 3168 03 8555 0735 · sales@classaaudio.com.au

FORWARD THINKING FOR AWARD-WINNING AUDIO

★★WINNER★★ 2025 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

P801
MONO-BLOCK POWER AMPLIFIER

The P801 is March Audio's new flagship mono block power amplifier. Based on the new Purifi 1ET9040BA module, this simply elegant product is milled from solid aluminium with a tough anodized treatment. Exceptional fit, finish and build quality.

★★WINNER★★ 2025 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

UKKONEN AWG FLOOR STANDING SPEAKER

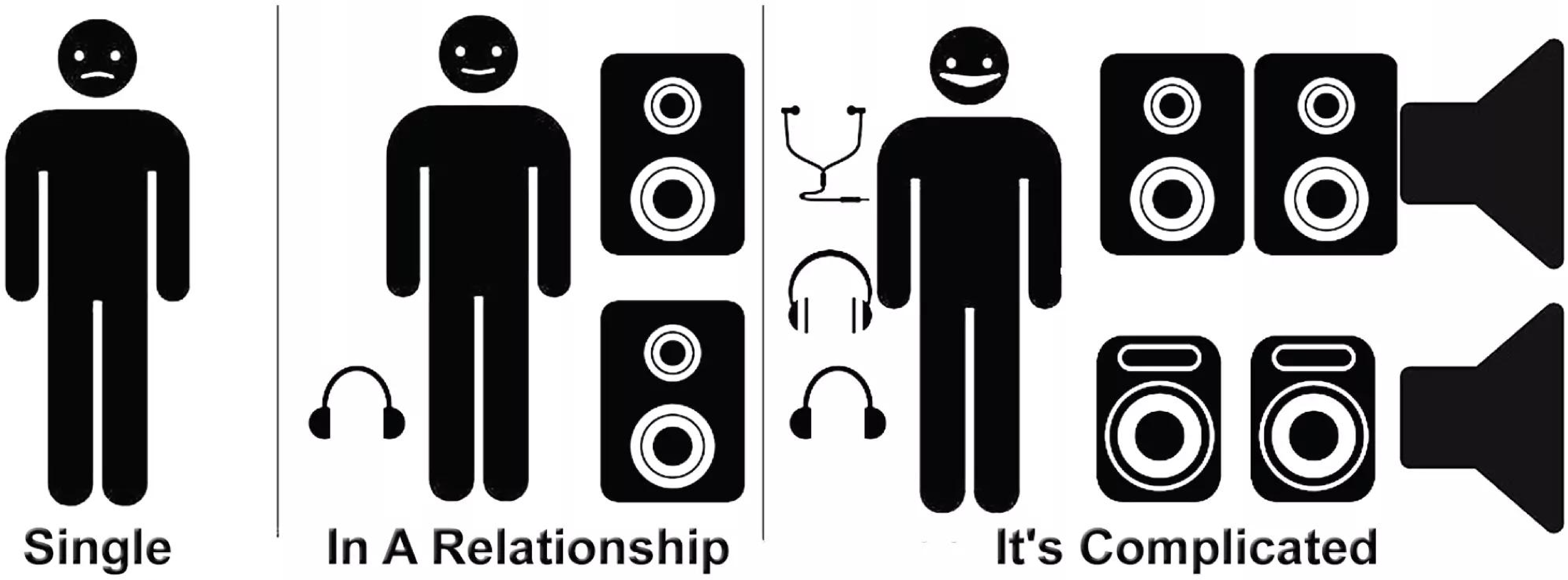
We are very excited to present our new Ukkonen AWG floor standing speaker featuring state of the art drivers from Purifi and SB Acoustics with beautiful solid wood or painted cabinets.

Ukkonen is a Finnish word meaning "thunder" and March Audio believes this very aptly describes the incredible bass extension and dynamics of the Ukkonen speaker.

W www.marchaudio.com **E** alan@marchaudio.com **P** +61 (0)447 946 771

Enjoy the Music.com®

Reviews News Show Reports And More...



Elevate Your Audio Experience with the Atacama Evoque Eco 44/16 Design Edition

Discover the pinnacle of audio furniture with the Atacama Evoque Eco 44/16 Design Edition. Crafted in the UK, this modular Hi-Fi rack is designed for audiophiles who demand both performance and aesthetics.

Whether you're upgrading your home audio system or building a new setup, the Atacama Evoque Eco 44/16 Design Edition offers the perfect blend of style and functionality. Enhance your listening experience today.

Explore more at atacama-audio.com.au

Atacama

Tivoli Hi-Fi™
Delivering Sound Excellence

1800 848 654 | info@tivolihifi.com.au
155-157 Camberwell Road,
Hawthorn East Victoria 3123

tivolihifi.com.au

HeyNow Hi-Fi
by Geoff Haynes

2023 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS
VICTORIA'S RETAILER OF THE YEAR 2023

GEOFF HAYNES

Your friendly guide on your Hi-Fi journey

Discover what true high-fidelity listening feels like with our latest arrivals and exclusive offers.

Immerse yourself in the warmth of **Origin Live** turntables and tonearms, or explore digital precision with the stunning **Metronome DS Series**.

Stream effortlessly with **Aurender** and **Lumin**, and bring your music to life with our **Amphion speaker specials**—crafted for accuracy and emotion.

Just landed: the legendary **Bryston** range—engineered for power and purity.

And for those who crave deep, effortless bass, our **REL Serie S subwoofers** are in stock now.

Finally, elevate your listening with the **Stax SR-007s**—available for demo, so you can experience the magic for yourself.

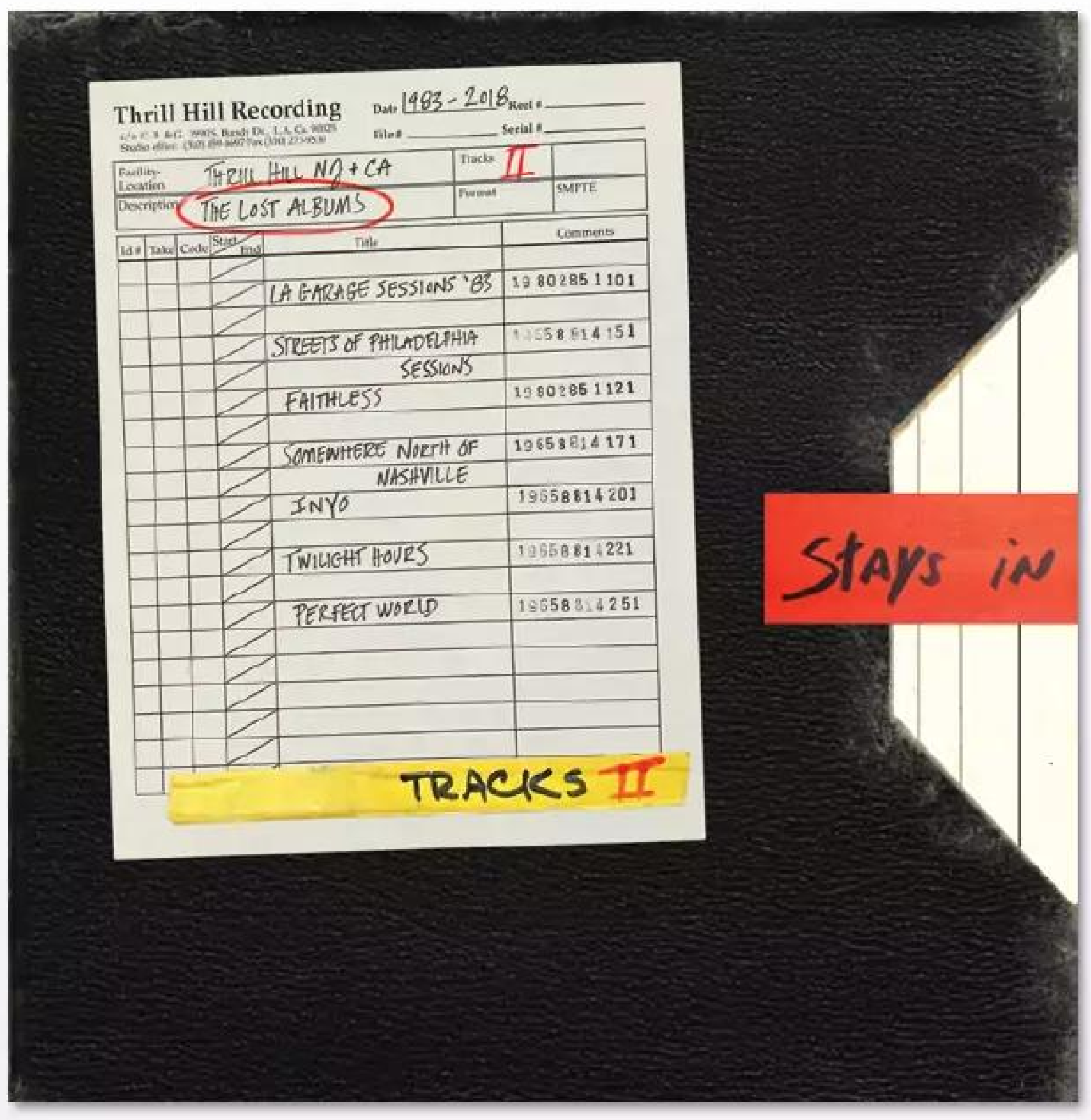
Visit us today and rediscover what your music was meant to sound like.

Keep up to date with what's going on at HeyNow Hi-Fi by subscribing to the website newsletter; you'll find the link at **heynowhifi.com.au**

ORIGIN LIVE METRONOME LE SON VRAI aurender LUMIN KLH BRYSTON STAX amphion REL ACOUSTICS LTD.

Phone: (03) 9525 0022
Text: 0415 668 307
Email: geoff@heynowhifi.com.au

www.heynowhifi.com.au



Bruce Springsteen

Tracks II: The Lost Albums SONY

Putting the flawless first 14 years of Bruce Springsteen's recorded output to one side, there's been a marked inconsistency since 1987's 'Tunnel Of Love;' for every 'Ghost Of Tom Joad' high point there's been a substandard release like 'Working On A Dream'. But rumours of lost work abounded, especially from his unusually sparse 1990s.

This absolutely staggering collection of seven albums recorded – and in some cases very nearly put out – between 1983 and 2018 fills in the blanks and makes you wonder why lesser records were released instead. There's nothing on 2014's odd 'n' sods *High Hopes* to match what's here, for a start. Sadly there's no *Electric Nebraska*, although that'll arrive eventually. Instead *LA Garage Sessions '83* finds Bruce moving towards the world-conquering *Born In The USA* with songs appearing in slightly altered form, such as a never-better 'My Hometown', mixed with should-have-beens like the Nebraskan strains of 'Richfield Whistle'. At the other end is the E-Streety 'Perfect World', a looser entry not conceived as an album, which ranges from the anthemic 'Cutting Knife' to the slow-rolling 'Blind Man'.

In between, after *Streets Of Philadelphia Sessions* expands the gentle-beats approach of his Oscar winner to moving effect, especially on 'Farewell Party', are four albums that knock at least half of what was released during the same period into a cocked hat. 'Faithless', an abandoned soundtrack, combines Tom Joad-like instrumentation and gospel voices to mesmerising effect. Piano-based love song 'God Sent You' is capable of moving a recalcitrant statue. 'Somewhere North Of Nashville', the long-promised 'country' record, is the pedal steel-drenched sound of a wild night out in Bakersfield, veering from the roadhouse chug of 'Tiger Rose' to the last-call heartbreak of 'You're Gonna Miss Me When I'm Gone'.

Inyo, containing riveting border tales, such as the exceptional 'The Last Charro', sung to a Mariachi orchestra, shows that Springsteen could have had a career as a screenwriter if the music hadn't panned out. *Twilight Hours* is a sister record to late-period masterpiece *Western Stars* and very nearly its equal. The glorious widescreen orchestrations of 'Two Of Us', the sparse beauty of 'Lonely Town' and the Bacharachian longing of 'Sunday Love' could each have replaced the incongruous 'Sleepy Joe's Café' on *Western Stars* because they're that great.

This collection is a breathtaking gift that Springsteen acolytes will cherish. They don't call him The Boss for a laugh.

Greg Lake

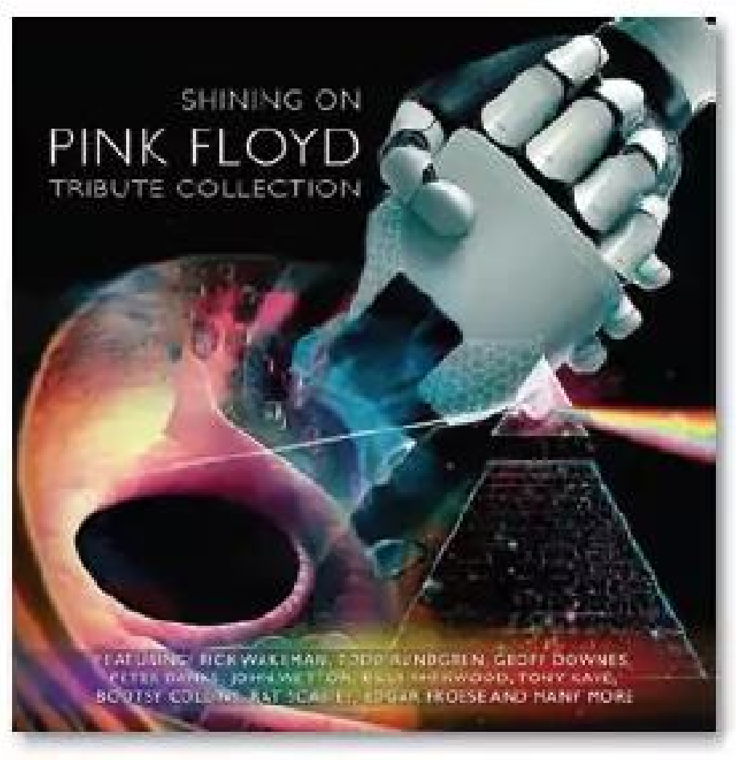
Live SPIRIT OF UNICORN

Keith Emerson's genial insecurities meant he could never fully acknowledge Greg Lake's contribution to ELP, but Lake certainly could. And while Emerson couldn't really conceive of anything less than epic, Lake was happy performing at a more human level. *Live* was recorded during a 20-date UK tour that Lake undertook in late 2005 at the less-than-hallowed Stevenage Theatre. The show, here spread across two CDs, covers most of ELP's greatest hits from *Pictures At An Exhibition* to *Fanfare For The Common Man* (although Tarkus is given a miss) and Lake's finest moments with King Crimson, plus a couple of solo songs, including I 'Believe In Father Christmas'. Lake is in good voice throughout, particularly on 'Take A Pebble', which is done on acoustic guitar rather than piano and is a highlight of the show. His five-piece band do a good job of reproducing ELP's more fiendish pieces, although interestingly it takes two keyboard players to do justice to even a restrained Emerson. This release includes a DVD film of the show with backstage and rehearsal footage.

The Grateful Dead

Gratest Hits RHINO

A true Deadhead, on being told that the Grateful Dead were commemorating their 60th anniversary with a single-CD compilation, might risk a seizure. The band had one hit single, in 1987, but no one has had more chart albums. Last year, they released a 19-CD set of shows played in August 1978. The current Dead & Company struggle to find stadiums big enough to accommodate ticket demand (they're currently in residence at Las Vegas' Sphere), and their shows rarely dip under four hours. *Gratest Hits* begins five albums into the Dead's career with 1970's 'Workingman's Dead'. They'd finally abandoned trying to condense their 40-minute jams onto record, which had left them $200,000 in debt, hooked up with lyricist Robert Hunter and started writing concise songs. Crosby, Stills & Nash gave them lessons on how to sing and harmonise in the studio. It transformed their fortunes. They flowered incandescently with *American Beauty*, which supplies four tracks, while the rest comes from the mid-to-late 70s. It ends appropriately with 1987's 'Touch Of Grey'.



Various

Shining On – Pink Floyd Tribute Collection CHERRY RED

Although best known for his associations with Yes since 1989, multi-instrumentalist and studio whiz Billy Sherwood has an expansive sideline in tribute albums. He hit prog rock gold in 2005 by co-producing (alongside Bob Kulick) *Back Against The Wall*, an all-star, song-by-song take on Floyd's 1979 double. This box set delivers three similarly styled Sherwood-helmed remakes that followed. *Return To The Dark Side Of The Moon* (2006) stays faithful to the original arrangements and features 36 A-listers including Rick Wakeman (playing brilliant piano on 'The Great Gig In The Sky'), Tommy Shaw (singing a fine 'Money'), Adrian Belew and Robby Kreiger. On 2021's *Still Wish You Were Here*, Wakeman's MiniMoog enriches 'Welcome To The Machine', Joe Satriani cuts loose on 'Wish You Were Here', and Steve Hackett does the same on 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond' (Parts 1-5). Bootsy returns for 'One Of These Days' on *Meddle Reimagined* (2023), but on the softer tracks it's the singers that stand out – James Labrie, Mark Stein and, particularly, Terry Reid are fab. Each album is great fun.

Chicago

Chicago II RHINO

Before they were subsumed by Roman numerals and a string of MOR hits, Chicago began as Chicago Transit Authority, a bold rock/jazz fusion band, loudly sticking a brass trio onto their four-piece rock core. They were brimming with confidence, and made their self-titled debut a double. Their jumbled collection of jazzy/pop ballads, rock songs and chants from the notorious 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago was still riding high in the charts when they set about recording the follow-up less than a year later. They still had plenty of material, so another double it was — and they carried on blending seemingly divergent styles into successful pop music, most notably with the classically inspired six-song suite *Ballet For A Girl In Buchannon*, which yielded two hits: the upbeat 'Make Me Smile' and the poignant 'Color My World'. Then there's the darker 'Poem For The People' and the politically charged five-song 'It Better End Soon'. Even at this distance, it's a stunning array.

Bowers & Wilkins

Crafted.
Honed.
Perfected.

Bowers & Wilkins 700 Signature Series.

700 Series Signature builds on that extraordinary pedigree, with optimised technologies and unique, luxurious finishes to deliver performance and elegance that's a level above the best.

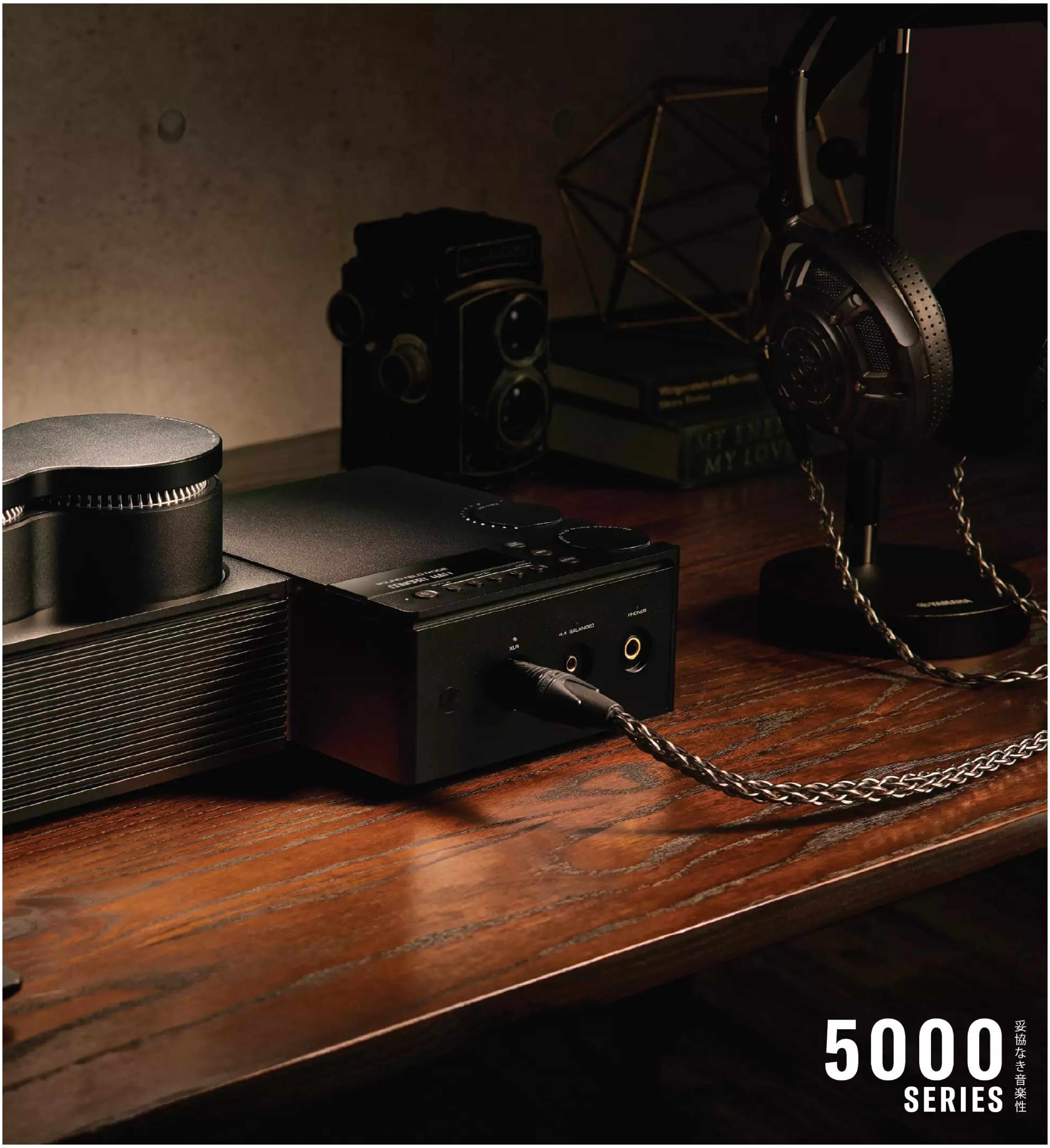
702 S3 Signature
Midnight Blue

705 S3 Signature Datuk Gloss
also available in Midnight Blue

HTM71 S3 Signature Datuk Gloss
also available in Midnight Blue

SCAN TO
LEARN MORE

E sales.au@soundunited.com P 02 9196 8990 W bowerswilkins.com BowersWilkinsAu



MUSICALITY WITHOUT COMPROMISE

YH-5000 ORTHODYNAMIC™ HEADPHONES | HA-L7A HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

9037

EISA AWARD Best Product 2023-2024
HIGH-END HEADPHONES
Yamaha YH-5000SE

stereonet APPLAUSE AWARD
YH-5000SE

YAMAHA
Make Waves

au.yamaha.com